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SCIENCE FICTION STORIES  
JANUARY 1986

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# Opinion

by Robert Silverberg

It is beginning to seem as though we are actually on our way to winning the war against "sci-fi."

"Sci-fi," of course, is the horrendous Hollywoodesque nickname for science fiction that was coined about 1954 by the warmhearted and kindly Los Angeles literary agent Forrest J Ackerman in a moment of misguided cleverness. Forry, who has long been a quick man with a cunning neologism, dreamed this one up as an analogy to "hi-fi." Immensely pleased with his nifty new word, Forry then promoted the daylight out of it in the best Hollywood fashion and managed to get it into the language, to the supreme annoyance of most of the other members of the science-fiction community. Now we see it all over the place: newspaper accounts that cite the opinion of "sci-fi great Isaac Asimov" on some technological breakthrough, review columns that purport to discuss the "best sci-fi books of the month," and, of course, lists of "upcoming sci-fi films of the season" in the movie pages. The word is insidious, ubiquitous, and discordant to the ear of many within the SF world. But — I'm pleased to report — we may have the damned thing on the run, finally, after thirty years of suffering under its lash.

"Hi-fi," which was Ackerman's inspiration for his own neologism, is itself now an obsolete term. It may very well be unfamiliar to most readers under the age of twenty-five. "Hi-fi" was an advertising man's gimmicky contraction of "high fidelity" — itself

a kind of semantic shorthand for what is known today as "stereo." (Back in far-off 1954, home music systems did not deliver stereophonic sound. A few pioneers dabbled in experimental "binaural" sound, as it was called then, but nearly all recorded music came in single-channel form and was played back through a single speaker. The best home music systems were dubbed "high-fidelity" outfits, because they more accurately reproduced the information on the records than did the average cheap record-player. "High fidelity" turned into "hi-fi," probably to the annoyance of the professionals in the music-reproduction field. But when stereophonic sound became the standard mode somewhere around 1960, the old term "high-fidelity set" went into the semantic discard heap and people began calling their home music systems "stereos." And so nobody talks of "high fidelity" or "hi-fi" any more.) (My parents called a refrigerator a "frigidaire" and a phonograph a "victrola." Nobody uses those terms any more, either, including the manufacturers who coined them originally.)

One disagreeable thing about "sci-fi" is that it doesn't mean anything. "Hi," at least, is simply a phonetic reduction of "high." But "sci," though it has sometimes been used as an abbreviation for "science" in such constructions as "The Poly-Sci Institute," never had general use in that way. (It does now, as "sci-tech" and such. Ackerman may be responsible

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for that formation too, coming out of "sci-fi.")

And "fi" may be a more or less acceptable shortening of "fidelity," though I don't think so, but "fi" is scarcely suitable as a contraction of "fiction." The two syllables of "fiction" break in only one way: fic-tion — and the Ackerman term, by blithely dropping the "c" from "fic," slashes away at the Latin root of the word, *fictilis*, "capable of being molded." (Going onward back to an original meaning of "earthen" or "made of clay," and even farther back to *ingere*, "to fashion, to mold," which tells us vividly what fiction really is. Extensive etymological/philological education is no longer available, which is why people are unaware that words are not mere arbitrary sounds but rather have roots going back to prosaic and concrete underlying meanings. Not knowing the roots, we lose track of meanings, which is why we now find words sliding around in such a bewildering way in popular usage.)

"Sci-fi" also sounds dumb. It sounds slick. It sounds empty. It's painful to those who earn their livings writing science fiction, which is itself a fairly imprecise term (how much science, after all, is there in *The Martian Chronicles*, or *More Than Human*, or *Childhood's End*, or the *FOUNDATION* series, all of which are generally considered to be classics of science fiction?), but which at least does not offend the ear and the mind.

And so there has been a counterattack by science-fiction professionals. Forry Ackerman is a universally beloved figure, justifiably proud of having coined a word that seems to have established itself in the language, and one thing that we regret in this whole imbroglio is that in attacking his word we seem to be attacking Forry.

We like Forry; we love Forry; but we hate his word, and at the risk of hurting his feelings — I know that it does — we have tried to stamp it out. Many of us derisively pronounce "sci-fi" as "skiffy," to the bewilderment of outsiders. When interviewers ask us for our opinions on current trends in "sci-fi", we politely but firmly tell them that the term offends our sensibilities just as the terms, "nigger," "wop," or "kike" offend those to whom those terms are offensive. This has had a gradual consciousness-raising effect out there, it seems. "Sci-fi" is beginning to lose ground in the popular press.

The most inspired form of counter-attack — I wish I knew who thought of it — has involved sending "sci-fi" back to the land of its birthplace, that is, Hollywood. Serious efforts have been made to distinguish between "science fiction" — the stuff that you read and that such people as Heinlein, and Asimov, and Varley, and Pohl, and Silverberg write — and "sci-fi," the nitwit Hollywood product, typified by *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Conan the Destroyer*, and all those other gaudy numbskull special-effects epics.

And this seems to be winning. My evidence for that is an article by none other than Forrest J Ackerman, published recently in *Starlog*, the SF movie magazine. Rather plaintively, Forry says that his term is being misused, that he never meant it to apply only to junky Hollywood nonsense but rather to *all* science fiction. "*At no time did I intend it as a term of denigration*," he says. "*It was never created as an adverse adjective to apply to films, it was never created as a negative term, period.*"

If Forry Ackerman is worried that people out there are getting the wrong message about "sci-fi," then the right

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message must be getting through. "Sci-fi" becomes a useful coinage after all; it gives us a label under which we can categorize all that has been worst in science fiction. And Forry's defense of his pet term indicates that the distinction is on its way toward becoming

established. Already I've seen reviews say of a book, "This isn't science fiction at all; it's just sci-fi." Forry's philological ingenuity thus is justified. We've really needed such a term as "sci-fi" all along.

✂



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# Book Reviews

## by John Gregory Betancourt

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Last column I promised to reveal my philosophy of literature (as it applies to science fiction). It is:

*Written science fiction is a complex form of television.*

Consider: When you read a novel or short story (or even nonfiction) you construct pictures in your head — complex images. You seem to be seeing what you read. Even now, if I tell you that it's night out and I'm sitting in an overstuffed armchair, smoking a pipe, and writing my column out in long-hand for my secretary to type and mail off tomorrow, that's what you'll see as you read. Perhaps you'll view me from a distance and hear a voice-over telling you my thoughts (this column); perhaps you'll be looking over my shoulder, directly at my script. Never mind that it's ten o'clock in the morning, I don't smoke, and I'm sitting in front of a computer: it's the first image that counts.

Why is *all* writing so visual? Because we've all been trained by those magic boxes with pictures in them? I don't think so. I believe it's part of our species' history — the same will-to-see-what-can't-be-seen that drove our ancestors to draw pretty pictures on cave walls in France.

In other words, imagination.

Imagination puts pictures on our mental television screens. Because the images are produced with a minimum of outside stimuli, they are clearer, sharper, and infinitely more *real* than anything material televisions (or movies) can produce. Your mind fills in all

the holes: not only the sights and sounds, but tastes, smells, touches, emotions. A good book instantly seizes the reader's attention — and holds it through use of sense impressions. (These sense impressions can be called the mind's television signal. If a lot of sense impressions are there, the picture is strong; if only a few are present, the picture is weak and often unclear, or murky.)

Thus, when you read, you really watch a series of pictures created in your mind. This is the act of reading. To get the best results, writers need to keep in mind the visual impact of fiction.

But enough. You get the — er — picture. I could spend this whole column analyzing fiction and then have enough to say left over to fill several good-sized books. Next column I'll talk about novelizations of movies as a necessary (?) evil. Now on to the reviews:

### **Night of Power**

by Spider Robinson

Baen Books, \$13.95 (hardcover)

*Night of Power* is a strange — and good — book. Strange because, as I read it, I felt as though I were reading a Heinlein novel. (If Robinson meant it to be a Heinlein pastiche, he caught the mood, characters, action, description, and sense of story movement exactly right.) And yet there's a lot of Spider Robinson in the book, too. Like Robinson, the protagonist (Russell Grant) is an American expatriate living

in Nova Scotia. He feels at once excited and alienated at his return to a New York City where white people are slowly being driven back into fortified retreats.

Because of war in Africa, racial tensions are running high. Russell is married to black dancer, Dena, and has a (white) child from his first marriage. When their car is accidentally forced into Harlem, they are attacked by young hoods, and about to be murdered and robbed. Then a mysterious, charismatic black man named Michael saves them.

From then on the whole family gets more and more caught up in an underground movement which Michael is leading. The time of rebellion, when all black revolutionaries will unite to take over, is the Night of Power, and the whole Grant family plays an important part in Michael's plans. . . .

The excitement and tension run high; there are enough unexpected turns to keep all readers guessing, and the characters are involving and believable. I had only two problems with the book, both minor. First, it's set in 1996 (probably to make it a "relevant" political thriller), which strikes me as too near the present time. I would've believed the story more if it had been set a decade further into the future. Second, it becomes a bit too preachy at the end.

But it's still a very good book. Keep an eye out for it.

**Forerunner: The Second Venture**  
by Andre Norton  
Tor Books, \$13.95 (hardcover)

*Forerunner: The Second Venture* is a direct sequel to Norton's earlier novel, *Forerunner*. It follows the adventures of Simsa, a girl whose mind is half-occupied by a Forerunner — sort of. Simsa can draw on the

Forerunner's knowledge to a limited degree, and that gets her into trouble.

But a bit of background first: In Norton's Forerunner universe, humans are searching for whatever little bits of science or history hundreds of alien races — Forerunners — left behind before they disappeared forever. Fantastic sums of money are offered for the barest scrap of Forerunner lore. This quest-for-elder-knowledge theme runs through many of Norton's books — classics among them being *The Time Traders* and *Star Man's Son*. With the publication of *Forerunner* (Tor, 1981) I'd hoped to get answers to some of my questions about the enigmatic Forerunners . . . but was left more curious than ever. *Forerunner: The Second Venture* picks up Simsa's story just after the first book left off, and again I learned annoyingly little about Forerunners.

When Simsa is shipped away to be studied by the alien Zacathans — a race which has devoted itself to the search for Forerunner knowledge — she discovers that most of the people around her want to exploit her, and many wouldn't care if she died in the process. So she escapes by stealing a small lifeboat and soon makes planet-fall on a strange desert-world, where she spends what seems like 90% of the book fighting various creatures and coming to terms with her own dual nature.

The book isn't satisfying: it's one long chase, more or less, with mysticism quickly replacing science as the driving force behind Simsa. (Yes, I know all about that famous Clarke-ism "A sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." But Norton's pushing it here. It is fantasy in SFnal trappings, and it annoyed me.) I was also left feeling somewhat cheated at the end: a book with "Fore-

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runner" in the title should have told me more about those enigmatic people who preceded humans into space than this one did.

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It's also, by the way, interesting to note that Tor still hasn't managed to spell Norton's name right on the covers of her hardcovers. (She spells Andre without an accent mark so it's *not* masculine.)

### **Mustapha and His Wise Dog**

by Esther M. Friesner

Avon Books, \$2.95 (paperback)

Long-time readers of *Amazing* will be familiar with Esther Friesner's amusing fantasy stories. This is her first novel, and it's not a bad read.

Mustapha, a boy destined to inherit nothing because his father has so many other, older sons, sets off by himself to seek his fortune. He is soon tricked into winning a magical dog named Elcoloq at a game of cards, and together he and Elcoloq travel through a quasi-Arabian Nights world, seeking fame, fortune, and a cure for Elcoloq's magical afflictions: not only can the dog talk, but he can change into human form at will. And when he's human, he's a thief. (He was the target of dozens of magical spells when his first master made the mistake of mistreating him in front of a lot of magicians. Now the spells are so intertwined that nobody except the legendary Queen Nahrit can unravel them. If they can find her.)

So they travel across the world, have oodles of adventures, meet interesting people (good and bad), and grow to be friends. The tale's great fun — in places I laughed out loud, which I seldom do when reading fiction. But still I have some reservations about the book: the plot is not that of a novel, but a half-dozen short stories cobbled

together into a noveloid. Each individual adventure could stand by itself; only the plot-thread of the search for Queen Nahrit links them together. As a result, the plot often meanders, and lacks any true focus. Toward the middle I became terribly impatient with the pace, and kept muttering, "Get on with it!" to myself.

It's not a bad book, but neither is it as good as it should have been. I wanted — and expected — more. Still, you ought to read it, anyway — it's a cut above the run-of-the-mill costume fantasies being perpetrated by so many publishers.

### **Sailing to Byzantium**

by Robert Silverberg

Underwood-Miller, \$12.95 (hardcover)

Speaking of authors associated with *Amazing*. . .

Strictly put, this isn't a novel, although here it's been published (and priced) like one. It's a novella that originally appeared in *Asimov's*.

The plot: Charles Phillips woke up one day in the 50th century — in a strange world populated by a race of immortals. These immortals travel between cities (of which there are always just five — no more, no less) that are constantly being changed: Timbuctoo replacing Thebes replacing Athens . . . He remembers little of his life. He is there as an amusement. His companion, Gioia, is one of the future people. Her life is one long celebration as she tours the wonders of the ancient world, being served by "temporaries" — artificially-constructed people who act out the parts of natives in the cities.

The book is emotionally uninvolved at first, but I soon got caught up in Phillips's search for Gioia when she leaves him, and the cities and their inhabitants are a breathtaking creation. Silverberg also tackles such heady

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subjects as the nature of humanity and immortality, and the answers he comes up with are disturbing and memorable. This is good, ambitious, serious SF; not Silverberg's best work, by any means, but worth reading if you haven't yet — and if you're willing to pay the thirteen bucks to do so.

### **The Pale Shadow of Science**

by Brian W. Aldiss

Serconia Press, \$10.00 + \$.75 p/h (hardcover)

This handsome little book is a collection of Brian Aldiss's essays — some autobiographical, some critical of other SF writers, some on science fiction in general. I found the three autobiographical ones fascinating: they are set in a British public school (in the U.S. we'd call it a private school), in the army, and in a haunted house (sort of). Aldiss calls them notes "... toward an autobiography which I intend one day to write ... once I have set a few more pressing novels down on paper." I wish he'd finish up those few books — I want to read more about his life!

The essays on SF writers deal with James Blish, Philip K. Dick, Harry Harrison, George Orwell, Mary Shelley, and Olaf Stapledon. They are all a bit dry, and I'd read a couple of them before.

The real heart of the book lies in two of its general essays: the one on the Helliconia books and the title essay, "The Pale Shadow of Science" — which deals with the true function of SF and science.

I think it's worth the ten bucks. You can order direct from the publisher: Serconia Press, 4326 Winslow Pl. N., Seattle, WA 98103.

### **Supernatural Fiction Writers:**

#### **Fantasy and Horror**

edited by E. F. Bleiler

Scribners, \$135.00 (2 vols; hardcover)

Without a doubt this is the most important reference work on fantasy and horror writers ever published. If you need such a book, this is what you've been waiting for: articles on everyone from French Decadent authors like Théophile Gautier to modern horror writers like Stephen King, from mainstream fantasists like H. Rider Haggard and Lord Dunsany to pulp writers like Robert E. Howard and E. Hoffman Price. I can't think of a single major horror or fantasy author who isn't listed here. Some of the subjects: Guy de Maupassant, Anatole France, E.T.A. Hoffmann, M.G. Lewis, Sir Walter Scott, Lovecraft, Poe, Mundy, Long, C.A. Smith, Derleth, Moore, Bloch, Ellison, Bradbury, and a score of others — 148 in all, by my count.

The list of essay authors is also impressive: novelists like Brian Stableford, editors like Michael Dirda (*The Washington Post*) and scholars like E.F. Bleiler and Thomas Clareson.

I highly recommend the book; despite the steep cover price, it's worth the money.

### **Sword and Sorceress II**

edited by Marion Zimmer Bradley  
DAW Books, \$2.95 (paperback)

The second volume of this anthology-series strikes me as about on a par with the first one: lots of fair stories, several good, but none truly outstanding. It was rather disappointing, in fact, because (from the line-up of names) I expected several tales to be first-class. The authors are Bruce D. Arthurs, Stephen Burns, C.J. Cherryh, Richard Corwin, Charles de Lint, Russ Garrison, Phyllis Ann Karr, Vera Nazarian, Diana Paxson, Rachel Pollack, Raul Reyes, Jennifer Roberson, Dana Cramer Rolls, Charles Saunders,

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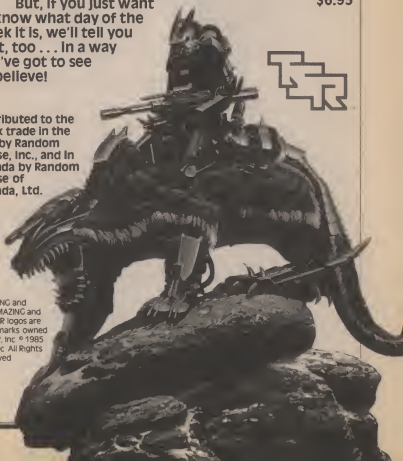
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Elizabeth Thompson (poem), and Deborah Wheeler. (One Big Name and several Medium-Sized Names. . . ) I am particularly fond of Rachel Pollock's story "The Red Guild" (about a woman assassin and how she eventually comes to terms with her work) and Elizabeth Thompson's poem ("On First Looking into Bradley's Guidelines, or Stories I Don't Want to Read Either").

Like Earth in *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, I'd classify the book as mostly harmless. If you can't live without it, buy it; if you can, you

might try a different anthology, perhaps Norton's and Adams's *Magic in Ithkar* (see last column).

One thing about the book *does* disturb me: the back cover blurb says "selected and introduced by the Wise Woman of Darkover, Marion Zimmer Bradley." (A "Wise Woman" is traditionally a pagan witch.) Really! I think this Darkover-cult nonsense has gone on long enough. Sure, the books are interesting. Sure, I've read a half-dozen of them, and enjoyed them. Two were nominated for Hugos, one in 1963 and one in 1978. But. . . ! Enough!

## by Robert Coulson

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### **Frank Frazetta, Book Five**

edited by Betty Ballantine  
Bantam, \$12.95 (paperback large size)

Frazetta is best known for his sword and sorcery renderings — iron-thewed barbarians and bare-buttocked females. This book includes a generous helping of both in both color and black and white. In addition, there are some contemporary movie poster works, a couple of pages of his early book covers, one genuine gadgety-science-fiction drawing, a couple of noble savages, and two pages of sketches "for an upcoming series based on a character created by Frank Frazetta" (series of what isn't specified).

Frazetta has never been my favorite artist, but he is certainly one of the top practitioners of his craft.

### **Footfall**

by Larry Niven & Jerry Pournelle  
Del Rey, \$17.95 (hardcover)

I don't know what stf authors have against Kansas. It was the drab contrast to Oz, Joseph J. Millard dumped a group of parasitic alien invaders on it in "The Gods Hate Kansas," and now

Niven's and Pournelle's aliens land their first paratroops there.

The book, interestingly enough, is of a very near future; the aliens are already here, and the unexplainable perturbations of Saturn's rings found by Voyager were caused by the alien stardrive, so they're getting ready to attack any day now. I would have preferred the book to be two-thirds as long and with half the characters, but big is beautiful these days.

The story of the alien invasion is well-plotted and seems as authentic as that plot could be. Both humans and aliens emerge as individuals; the aliens are not just a menace. It's an excellent action-adventure story.

**Exploring Fantasy Worlds:  
Essays On Fantastic Literature**  
edited by Darrell Schweitzer  
Borgo Press, \$6.95 (paperback)

This includes articles by assorted science-fiction authors, editors, and critics. Michael Moorcock's material on aspects of fantasy explains why the magazines he edited were highly influential, and why I couldn't stand them.

Sandra Miesel provides a specific critique of Silverberg's *Son of Man*. As I've never read the book, I can only assume that it's crisp and insightful. Editor Schweitzer points out some of the difficulties in using archaic language. Unfortunately, he homes in on *The Night Land*, which is one of my favorite works. He is probably right, but I still like the book's flavor.

L. Sprague de Camp has a brief look at Robert E. Howard's fiction, pointing out that it's vivid, but generally impossible. Poul Anderson contributes a critique of the works of Johannes V. Jensen; interesting enough, and I rather wish someone *would* reissue the long-out-of-print translations of Jensen's books. Fritz Leiber has a short essay on anima archetypes. Archetypes aren't really my bag. David H. Keller writes a well-deserved appreciation of *Titus Groan*. Ben Indick writes a very nice tribute to Robert Nathan, one of my favorite fantasists. Paul Spencer does the same for James Branch Cabell, who is *not* one of my favorite fantasists.

Considering that it's the third book in the "I. O. Evans Studies In The Philosophy of Criticisms of Literature," one assumes this is designed for academics, but a few readers might like it as well.

### **The Postman**

by David Brin

Bantam Spectra, \$14.95 (hardcover)

Some of this is fairly early Brin. It's expanded from two novelettes which appeared in the magazines in 1982 and 1984. I remembered the stories and the titles vividly, though I'd forgotten who wrote them. The idea is much simpler than Brin's recent work; it's the after-the-Bomb story, again.

Brin's WW III was short enough to avoid nuclear winter, but it pretty well

destroyed civilization. The protagonist is a former student who is trying to stay alive in the new barbarism. He finds the equipment of a postman and by fast talking hopes to perpetrate a con which will keep him alive and fed. Then he finds out he can't quit. The survivors are so eager for a symbol that he has to continue the masquerade.

There's a lot of action and some good old-fashioned melodrama, which I loved.

Recommended.

### **Moonsinger's Friends: An Anthology in Honor of Andre Norton**

edited by Susan Schwartz  
Bluejay Book, \$8.95 (trade paperback)

It's nice to see an homage to Norton, though not many of the stories are the sort that Norton would write. There's an introduction by editor Schwartz and "an open letter to Andre Norton" by Joan Vinge. The stories begin with "Sea Wrack" by Marion Zimmer Bradley, chronicling an adventure of Marion's *THIEVES' WORLD* character, Lythande. Predictable, but interesting. "Lior and the Sea" by Diane Duane is about a woman in a fantasy world who loves the sea — *really* loves it. "The Pale Girl, the Dark Mage, and the Green Sea" by Tanith Lee is a 3-page parable. "The Forest" by Poul Anderson is a guess at prehistory at the time of the Pleistocene glaciers. Probably the best story in the book. "Shadow Hart" by Sandra Miesel is of a woman who joins the Wild Hunt. "The Woman Who Loved Reindeer" by Meredith Ann Pierce is vaguely reminiscent of Native American legends and were-caribou. "The Price of Lightning" by Jayge Carr is of a woman who desires more power and of her effect on her society. "Bright-Eyed Black Pony" by Nancy Springer is a

cute little tale about wizards. "A Flock of Geese" by Anne McCaffrey is about a woman who survives disaster by ruling over a hole in the ground. "Of Law and Magic" by C. J. Cherryh is a nicely-plotted tale of wizards and luck incarnate. "Team Venture" by Diana Paxson is the beginning of a novel. "Defender of the Faith" by Judith Tarr is a fantasy of the crusades. "Catalyst" by Katherine Kurtz is a short about Camber. "The Foxwife" by Jane Yolen is a Japanese fantasy of were-foxes.

Overall, it's a reasonable assortment of original stories, ordered to fit a theme. The best are by Anderson, Cherryh, and Clayton. I won't call names by pointing out the worst.

Recommended more to readers of the anthologized authors than to Norton admirers.

### **The Dream Years**

by Lisa Goldstein

Bantam Spectra, \$13.95 (hardcover)

This one is a fantasy of the Parisian Surrealists of the 1920s, who are contacted by their fellows from the far future. A few of them travel through time to aid in the Great Revolution. It's all symbol and emotion and I hated it, but it's well enough written that I know people who will think it's great.

### **Emprise**

by Michael P. Kube-McDowell

Berkley, \$2.95 (paperback)

First novel by an excellent short-story writer. Unfortunately, it's the first of a trilogy, but one can't have everything.

The basic idea is that science discovers a method of permanently stopping fission. And uses it. The result, of course, is disaster.

The book concerns the efforts of

scientists, statesmen, and ordinary people to put some sort of world back together. They succeed, and the book ends with Earth's first starship meeting aliens. I think there's a rabbit or two in the hat of the science, but I don't know enough of modern theory to be sure. It certainly sounds convincing.

Highly recommended to anyone who likes a mixture of political and engineering fiction.

### **Clay's Ark**

by Octavia E. Butler

Ace, \$2.75 (paperback)

I missed this one in hardcover, and several of my friends said I should read it because it was a very good book. So I read this edition and found they were right.

The alien-disease gimmick doesn't seem too plausible, but Butler makes it fascinating. Her characters are real people and the reader gets interested in them. (Despite the more or less happy ending, however, I think she's left the Earth in very bad shape.)

If you didn't get the hardcover, by all means get the paperback.

### **Sabazel**

by Lillian Stewart Carl

Ace, \$2.75 (paperback)

After insulting this one to the author's face, before I'd even seen it, I figured I should at least review it.

It's a notch up from the usual feminist sword and sorcery, in that Carl is trying to depict males and females as approximately equal. The political background seems to be that of the Greek city-states or the beginnings of Rome. Bellasteros is somewhat of a fictionalized Alexander the Great, while Danica is the warrior-queen of the Amazons, who are pretty much as portrayed in Greek myth. They must, of course, fall in love, but obviously

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can't live together unless one of them surrenders. Neither can do this. So they become wary allies in the intrigues of city-state politics. You can tell from the first where the plot is going, but there's lots of action while getting there.

### **Cats Have No Lord**

by Will Shetterly

Ace, \$2.75 (paperback)

I started reading this because of the intriguing title, but kept going because it's an entertaining book. It reads a little as though the cast of Asprin's *Myth* series had been thrown into *Thieves' World*.

The rather inept crew of heroes bumble their way through, fighting dragons, slaying wizards, and generally keeping one step ahead of total destruction.

It won't win any awards, but it's fun to read.

### **The Colour of Magic**

by Terry Pratchett

Signet, \$2.95 (paperback)

How can you resist a book which opens with the cosmological theory that all the worlds are carried by giant turtles toward the turtle's mating ground?

"When they arrived they would briefly and passionately mate, for the first and only time, and from that fiery union new turtles would be born to carry on a new pattern of worlds. This was known as the Big Bang hypothesis."

Pratchett continues in this vein, taking gleeful swipes at most of the extant sword and sorcery heroes.

It's a very funny book and well worth reading.

**Donald A. Wollheim Presents the 1985 Annual World's Best SF**

edited by Donald A. Wollheim

DAW, \$2.95 (paperback)

This opens with "The Picture Man" by John Dalmas, an interesting twist on the theme of the camera that photographs elsewhere. "Cash Crop" by Connie Willis is a future version of the sharecropper story full of dust and grim forebodings, and very well done. "We Remember Babylon" by Ian Watson must be full of symbolism, because it has nothing else to recommend it. "What Makes Us Human" by Stephen R. Donaldson is a berserker story with the theme of man over machine. "Salvador" by Lucius Shepard is a Viet Nam war story set in the near-future in Central America. The technique is good, but the story is entirely predictable. "Press Enter ■" by John Varley may well be the ultimate — to date — computer story, involving the murder of a man who doesn't officially exist. Excellent. "The Aliens Who Knew, I Mean, Everything" by George Alec Effinger is a moderately amusing tale of overly helpful messengers from the stars. "Bloodchild" by Octavia E. Butler is a very strange but excellently done story of mixed human-alien families. "The Coming of Groonga" by Gary W. Shockey involves a conflict between human and alien from the very weird point of view of the alien, and ends with the ultimate miscegenation. "Medra" by Tanith Lee is of the immortal woman who must live alone and of one of the spacemen who visits her. I thought it was beautiful the first time I read it; but when I re-read it for review, I kept picking holes in it. Read for emotional content, but don't re-read.

Overall, it's a good anthology, though not entirely what I'd pick for the best of the year. (Someday somebody is going to ask me to pick a Best of the Year, and all the other reviewers can sneer at it.)

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# Discussions

## by the Readers

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*A goodly number of readers — and many whom we would like to become readers — send us story manuscripts. Almost all of those that we return go out with some words of criticism: salient faults, errors of logic, fact, or science (but also such good points as we find). We have heard back from a fair number of writers lately. Feeling that their remarks might not have been meant for the letter column, we have given the initials of the writers only. Now there have been those who have taken umbrage; but they have done so in a bad-tempered way which we thought best not to display here. Those represented below are all couth, traught, and grunted.*

— George H. Scithers

Just a brief thank you for your criticism of a recently rejected short story of mine. Although I felt as though I had leaned over to pet a friendly dog and been bitten in return, I appreciate the time you spent to comment on my efforts.

P. J. H., Laguna Beach CA

Once again, thanks for the prompt reply to one of my stories, even though you didn't like it. Your personal reply was most welcome and, unfortunately, correct.

I hope you find the enclosed story more appropriate. I feel like the writers who kept sending things to Campbell until he bought something.

B. G., Louisville KY

Thank God! An editor with guts! Thank-you for the scathings from Scithers on my book *Feller*.

Yes, the prose in the foreword is flowery, but I was too close to the work to see it. That is why I appreciate even crappy comments from an editor.

No one teaches us to be writers. We have to fail and be rejected repeatedly while somewhere along the way we figure out why we're being rejected. A sale, even to a good market, guarantees nothing the next time we sit down to write.

So, I am sincere in thanking you for your comments. The novel is not good yet, but with patience and persistence, one day the writer will be.

B. T. M., Ft. Collins CO

With a couple of your rejection notices under my skin, I paused, swore a bit, scratched my head, and put bandages on the wounds by selling a pair of short pieces as far removed from science fiction and fantasy as possible.

Thanks for your attention and helpful commentary. I never liked medicine until after it worked. At least yours prompted me into selling articles, albeit in the wrong market. I hope a cure has been wrought in your field as well.

S. D. P., Swanton VT

Several months have passed since my last offering to you, because I've been spending my time rewriting

stories previously submitted to *Amazing*®. I'm telling you this to let you know that I appreciate your comments on my work, (though my husband is puzzled that my "appreciation" sometimes includes ill-humored mutterings and clenched, waving fists) and that, in each case, I have tried to figure out what it is you're trying to tell me.

You've helped, really. I can tell. You force me to take another look, and, invariably, I then see what I couldn't or wouldn't before. I don't always agree with you, and sometimes your comments baffle me; nevertheless, you say *something*. The result is that each revision of each piece brings me closer to my original, pre-verbal vision — the soul of each of my stories. (We all need to be reminded that "revision" is exactly what the word says, a "reseeing" of the original idea or intent of the story. It is not just moving a comma or changing a word here and there.)

Anyway, I thank you.

M. A. H., Irvine CA

Thank you for your recent rejection. Yes — thank you. When I began to write seriously nearly three years ago, I thought that tales of drawers full of rejection slips, or walls papered with them were doubtlessly myths created to cushion me for that occasional story that found no market. There's no free lunch, comes to mind.

It's encouraging to know there are editors out there who actually read material submitted to them. It helps balance out those returned in less than ten days with the second page still flipped over, accompanied by "does not meet our current needs. . . ." How could they know? And that, after a blurb in *Writer* or *Writer's Digest* saying how they are looking for sub-

missions from new writers! I suppose the Marines no longer want a few good men.

I know I'm going to make it. Thanks for the help along the way.

C. M. L., Nickerson NE

*Mistake not: editors do know their current needs; and the sad truth is that a great many manuscripts can be seen, from the very first page (with a quick look at the end) not to be suitable. Our hope is that by reading more and commenting we can head off at the pass future submissions that repeat the same faults — and eventually get better work that meets our future needs.*

*Yes, and: do not ever, EVER invert pages in your manuscript! Make sure, moreover, that they came back from wherever they've been (copying service, an editorial office) in the right order and orientation. Don't trust anybody — but DO trust the editor to whom you are sending your work. You thought it was good, didn't you? Now imagine the editor, absorbed in reading, utterly spellbound, and BAM! comes the distraction of that inverted page. There goes your story, down the drain. Need we say more?*

— George H. Scithers

Dear Mr. Scithers:

I notice in *Locus* that subscriptions to *Analog*, *Amazing*® and *Asimov's* are all down drastically, which disturbs me greatly. I hope the new television series will boost your sales. Other than that, I liked the idea one of your readers had for passing out a free copy of the magazine with rôle-playing games. Also, I buy anything that seems to have articles in it that are pertinent to my writing ambitions. I believe a regular 1-page column with tips for writers, hints from editors, etc.



would encourage any SF and fantasy writers to subscribe. (Note the articles in *Asimov's* about Clarion workshops lately — fascinating.)

I think Carol Deppe is brilliant, by the way, and would love to see a story by her. Also, would like to congratulate her on her idea of a Science Fiction Writers Anonymous — a sadly needed and long overdue organization. Perhaps she'd be interested in organizing such a group with me? In my creative writing class our teacher keeps assigning homey little exercises, and is always astounded that my version of a love triangle turns out to include robots, androids, and aliens, and that I use anti-gravity and other such handy effects to solve my protagonist's problems! They can't understand why my mind works that way, but I'm gradually making my teacher and the other students into SF fans, I believe. If Carol and I could just learn to love writing formula romances, perhaps we could be rich! Sigh . . .

Best regards,  
Jacqueline Brown  
Texarkana TX

Dear Mr. Scithers:

In the July issue of this magazine I have come upon an error in your editorial judgement. You have deemed Mr. Bova's story "Space Weapons" an article of fact, when, in fact, it would better be labeled a work of opinion. Then again, maybe the error is mine.

I do not intend to belittle Mr. Bova's intentions, but his assertion that space-based defenses will make "an enormous contribution to peace and survival" is unfounded and dangerously destabilizing. If he believes the Kremlin will passively watch us install this system in space, I think I might have some riverfront property he might like as well.

But beyond what the Kremlin will or will not do, there is the so-called bottom line to consider. Mr. Bova gives the figure \$18 to \$27 billion for research and engineering. If the Trident submarine is anything to go by in cost over-runs, the figure should be doubled. And in this time of two-hundred-billion-dollar budget deficits and growing, when the system is finally completed, we will all be too poor to give a damn if we lived or died.

Sincerely yours,  
Mark Penrose  
Union City NJ

*Classification problem: the article isn't a regular department, it isn't fiction (as fiction is usually perceived), and we don't want to proliferate categories on the contents page beyond the present three. So, we listed it as fact.*

— George H. Scithers

Dear George,

Pray permit me to express my appreciation for what you're doing with *Amazing*® and its writers; I do look forward to each next issue with the expectation I'll find at least one story that either interests or amuses this long-time (the first *Amazing* I read was a 1939 *Quarterly*) science-fiction reader. In the same vein, please convey my compliments to Mr. "Iverson" [now Turtledove] for his "Unholy Trinity" — nice concept, nice development, nicely done.

Since you obviously are taking a great deal of interest in the young (speaking professionally rather than chronologically) writer, might I venture an area where the would-be bard might find the opportunity to polish his or her or its skills while at the same time having no small amount of fun: children's theater.

Oh, sure, I can hear it now. "Children's theater! Yuck!" As far as most children's theater activities are concerned, I quite agree. But this is why I feel there's opportunity out there.

Let me clarify this with an illustrative example: a couple of summers past, the director of my local community theater's summer youth activity project somewhat facetiously suggested that I write something for her group. Leaping forward with an enthusiastic "Maybe . . ." I thought about the idea for a six-and-a-half-pack and then started hitting the keys. Two days later, writing strictly spare time, I phoned the director and asked, "How does this sound?" and began reading the first lines of what was 55 minutes of sheer fantasy — in iambic pentameter, no less.

It took a month of three-hours-a-morning, five-days-a-week rehearsals to get this piece on the local recreation department's just-completed outdoor amphitheater stage, complete and replete with errant warriors, valkyries, elves, treacherous noblemen, the comic-relief jester who meets the inevitable tragic doom, and — yes — a dragon acted by eight of the kids in a cross between a conga line and a bunny hop.

Most importantly, it was enormous fun. Hard work, yes, especially when the temperatures outdoors were in the middle 90s. But fun!

As you know quite well; and, I hope, most of your stable of authors as well as those who would like to enlist in that select host *should* know, playwrighting is somewhat different from any other form of fiction, if for no other reason than the author can see the creation come to life. And certainly there is a demanding market out there. Without access to any references, I'd guess there must be a couple of thou-

sand such children's theater programs across the country, and a large percentage of these would dearly love to have the chance to present an original drama written especially for them.

A few words of caution: we're writing for kids, so we can be violent but we cannot be bloody. Next, we can have all the sorcery we desire — but it must be magic of the sort the theater group's technicians can accomplish. Beyond those limitations, (as my script's choragus said) "Imagination's the guide and the universe is the bound."

Nobody's going to get rich with this sort of writing. As a matter of fact, the playwright will be fortunate to recover the cost of the paper used.

But, oh, what a wonderful way to test talent and discover not only one's ways with words, but also to share in an exciting, stimulating voyage of discovery to wild new worlds with a group of spirited youngsters!

Respectfully,  
Fred Burgess

*Sounds like fun indeed. Any other readers have experience in this area?*  
— George H. Scithers

*This is a good place to remind you all of the Rules for Addresses:*

1. *Things for the attention of the subscription department which do not simply involve sending a check should be addressed to Amazing® at P.O. Box 110, Lake Geneva, WI 53147-0110.*

2. *Subscriptions with payments therefor should go to Amazing® at P.O. Box 72089, Chicago, IL 60690.*

3. *Manuscripts should be sent to Amazing® at P.O. Box 8243, Philadelphia, PA 19101-8243, provided that you have checked a current issue of the magazine to see if this address is still current. We do not want the Phila-*

delphia address to get into reference books and market reports: it is only for people who regularly read the magazine. If in doubt, you can always send a MS to the Lake Geneva address.

4. Letters to the editor should be sent to the Lake Geneva address so the staff there can read them before passing them on to the people in Philadelphia.

— George H. Scithers

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### JOHN BRINN ( Jack ) GAUGHAN: 24 September 1930 — 21 July 1985

In 1967 Jack Gaughan became the only SF illustrator to win HUGOs in both fan and professional categories in the same year. In '68 and '69 he again won the best pro-artist HUGOs. From '69 to '72 he was the art editor of *Galaxy*, and in '77 he was art editor at *Cosmos*. His cover and interior art has appeared in most of the major SF magazines, including this one, and he did cover work for Ace, DAW, Paperback Library, and others. He was born in 1930; he died a few days ago of stomach cancer; and he is survived by his wife, Phoebe; his son, Brian; and his daughter, Norah.

Those are the facts, but they don't say a thing about the loss this planet just suffered.

I was a newcomer to SF writing when this legend was assigned to illustrate some of my stories. Shortly after, in May of 1979, I had a heart attack on my birthday. A few days later I received a letter from Jack commenting upon my birthday spectacular with: "Greetings! This is a reminder of your mortality!"

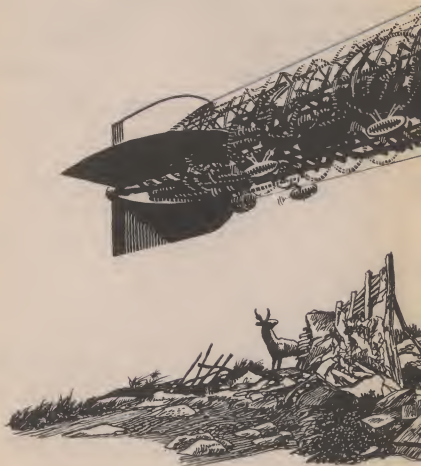
Jack's humor ranged from the delightful to the bitter black, and he had depths that no one even suspected. Since his teens he kept a diary in words and pictures that show him to be artist, cartoonist, poet, author, comedian, inventor, critic, teacher, and lover. He was an idealist frustrated by practical necessity. He had heart, compassion, love, and understanding for everyone in the world but himself. He was so down on himself that his friends frequently wanted to shake him to his senses. He was a kind, gentle person, and in the end he was something of a hero. He was my friend and I will miss him very much.

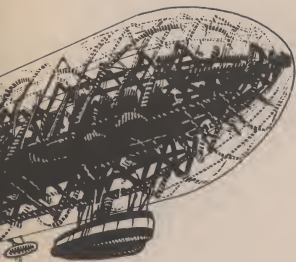
— Barry B. Longyear

# THE AIRS OF EARTH

by Paul J. McAuley

art: Jack Gaughan





Caliban: Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,  
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.  
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices  
That, if I then had wak'd after long sleep,  
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,  
The clouds methought would open, and show riches  
Ready to drop upon me; that, when I wak'd,  
I cried to dream again.

Shakespeare: *The Tempest*

Arion had never seen an ocean before.

On the morning of his first day on Earth (he had landed at dawn), he stalked the long seafront of Galveston, watching waves ceaselessly cast fans of foam on the pebbly beach, wondering what caused them. Sol hung a fingerswidth above the level ocean horizon, and the old houses for which Galveston was famous had turned to greet it: new light flared on their polyhedral modules and glass cowlings. Arion touched his lyre, slung upside down at his shoulder, but there was not quite the need to play, or it was shattered by strangeness: Sol's platinum disc, too bright to look at, the white birds which harried the waves, the halogen tang of the wind, the steadiness of the gravity.

It was the same pull as standard shipboard gravity . . . yet different. Maintained not by a generator but by the simple mass of the world, the summed attraction of every atom of its being tugging at his. At last he was here, at last he had reached Earth. Every step was an affirmation of that reality.

Something leaped from the water in the middle distance, hung for a moment against the dawn. Arion leaned against the railing and waited for it to come again. Doubled this time: a pair of sleek creatures curvetting through glittering swells towards the shore.

He grinned, and the impulse resolved. He unslung his lyre, flipped the power switch and set the direction, and began. Something old, something with the flowing movement of the leaping creatures. His left hand struck melody from the strings of the jutting fretboard; his right set the rhythm with the keys in the lyre's body. The creatures arced towards him as if drawn by his playing. He tossed back his hair (blond streaked with white, it reached his shoulders) and loosed the rhythm of their leaping into the stately cadence.

The creatures turned where the long breakers gathered for their run onto shore. So close now that Arion could see their bottle-like snouts, their smoothly glistening hides darker above than below. And the figure clinging to each, human figures that stood for a moment as their steeds leaped again, then were gone.

Arion stopped playing. It was as if he had awoken into a dream.

The pair staggered waist-deep amongst creaming waves, wading towards the beach. One waved, might have shouted something, but the wind took it away. A moment later they were climbing a ladder set in the concrete revetment. Then they were over the railing.

The taller one reached to its masked face: the mask came away. Shaking out wet hair, a bronze vivid against the black wetsuit, the woman said, "That was wonderful!" Her face was square, with high cheekbones. A strong, beautiful face. Black eyes, set in slanted folds, met his with a direct gaze.

Agatherin left no stigmata, but Arion had crewed enough yachts to recognise those who could afford the life-extension treatments. *Os Fortunos*, the Golden, *Zolotistyaki*, *les Immortels*. . . Rich, long-lived, if not the rulers of the Federation certainly the owners of most of it. The woman looked no older than Arion and might not be: or might be a hundred. There was no telling.

Arion said politely, "I hope I didn't upset your animals."

"It was just as if your music intoxicated them." She laughed, and he thought of a pebble skipping over old, brittle glass. "Quite amazing. You must have woken the whole city, it was so clear across the water."

"No, Seyoura, I would not do that. My instrument generates signals in the auditory nerves, as some computers speak to you. Besides, the signals were directional."

"How quaint." The woman laughed again, and touched her companion's arm. "I've found who I'm taking, Antonio."

The other shrugged from her grip and shucked his mask. Forty? Fifty? His neatly pointed black beard was matted with seawater. He said, "Dolphins'll follow any music, long as it's loud enough."

"I'm sorry," Arion said again.

"Hell," the man said, "we were coming ashore anyway." In a different, almost petulant tone, he added, "Come on, Dominiq."

"No, he's mine." She smiled at Arion.

"Him?" The man's stare was darkly contemptuous. Arion looked away, his ears warming. "What are you, boy? Freespacer by that vest?"

"Intrasystems, Seyour." It was an admission.

The man pursed his lips, as if he might spit. But he didn't. "You're thinking of bringing that? Just because he can finger some nonsense or other on that thing."

"It was the last movement of Beethoven's sixth symphony, Seyour. My interpretation."

"Why Antonio, I believe you're jealous." The woman abruptly turned on Arion, her body slim as a dancer's in the close-fitting wetsuit. "You'll come with me? Or are you already contracted to go out to some world where they don't have parties?"

"I've only just arrived, Seyoura." Arion slung his lyre on his shoulder.

certain that she wasn't serious.

But her gaze held him. "Then you will come? And play. Of course you must play, and charm everyone as you charmed our steeds."

Her companion snorted.

"Seyoura. I —"

"But you simply must!" Her smile was dazzling, and when she grasped him by the wrist he discovered that her hand, although wet, was as warm as any child's.

"Seyoura," he said, submitting.

This time the man did spit, over the railing. "You're wasting your time," he told the woman.

"I am not. He will be my champion." She added, with a mischievous grin, "You still have to find someone, and before noon. You'd better hurry."

The man clipped his mask to his weighted belt, reached over his shoulder to disengage the flat airtank. "I'll be there," he said shortly, and stalked off down the curving esplanade.

"You're jealous," the woman called after him. "Admit it, Antonio!"

The man didn't look back. Watching him go, Arion felt something relax in his belly.

"What's your name?" the woman asked.

"Arion Arakavoi, Seyoura."

"Call me Dominiq. You're from a colony, yes? Novaya Zyemlya?"

"Novaya Rosya, Seyoura."

"Domi-niq."

"Domi-niq . . . what would you have me do?"

"Be yourself. Is that so hard? We're having a little competition to find the most interesting person to bring back to the party. Don't worry, you won't have to stay long if you don't like it. You will come?"

The last of his tension unravelled: he laughed. "Of course. I have been here only a few hours, and I want to see all I can."

"You've never been to Earth before? You can't have been a freespacer long. Of course, you look young."

"I've been one two years, Seyoura. But I promise that never before have I been here, for all that I tried. To Mars once, but never to Earth." Arion walked beside her as she started in the direction her companion had taken. Nervousness made words bubble in his head. "Ever since I left the Academy I wanted to see Earth, but until now I've never had the chance."

"All roads lead to Earth, they say, or is it all geodesics? Well, I suppose it was true before the Alea campaigns. My parents spent most of their time here then, leaving only to get their treatments. Did you know agatherin is actually illegal here? Now they never come, and I'm only here because of the midsummer festival in Los Angeles. We don't even own a house here now. I wander around, just like you."

"I hardly think so, Seyoura. Where is Los Angeles?"



"On the other side of the continent, in another country. But I'm not due there for days yet. Right now: I want a drink. The sea is damnably cold, I don't care what they say about wetsuits keeping it out."

"I had thought all Earth was like living in a room. Ships are like Earth, someone told me once, but really only the gravity is. And even that . . . I didn't think you could get cold."

"Oh, there are places colder than this. I was brought up in a house at Cape Ross. Cold? You wouldn't believe it. But my parents wanted me out of society's eye."

She led him away from the seafront, down a wide avenue. Palm trees arched on either side. Most of the shops in the setbacks of the terraced buildings were closed, but a man was setting tables out before the plate-glass window of a café, and when they sat at one he bustled up, wiping his hands on his apron, fussing attentively to Dominiq's simple order. When he brought the cups she handed him a creased piece of paper, which set off his effusiveness all over again.

Of course, Arion thought, they use promissory notes as a medium of exchange. He had heard of it, but to see it happen made him feel as he had when he had stepped onto the oil-stained concrete at the foot of the ship's ramp.

Dominiq sipped, and to be polite Arion sipped too. He was still wary of her, of what she represented. It was hot chocolate, whipped to a froth and sprinkled with pepper.

"Don't worry," Dominiq said suddenly. "I'm hardly older than you."

"I didn't —"

"It's something everyone wonders," she said peremptorily. "I'm not ashamed to say I've only been on the treatment for a year. I want to stay young a long time, and agatherin only slows aging, it doesn't prevent it. There's nothing wrong with wanting to live forever, is there?"

"I don't think so."

"I'm glad," she said, and went on to tell him about the time she'd hunted zithsa in the lowlands of Novaya Rosya, and when she had ascended Arul Terrek to watch the dawn at the end of winter's night.

Arion, who had never seen a live zithsa, had never been to Arul Terrek, nodded politely as she talked. He was still nervous, and tired now. He'd been awake for almost a full day, warping the ship into orbit, then watching it down in the clutches of the spacefield's gravithic generators. And instead of following the rest of the crew to find a room in the freespacers' quarter, he'd set off to explore the awakening city.

Dominiq chattered on, and he sipped cooling chocolate. There were a few people passing by now, and all glanced at the golden. But she didn't seem to notice these sideways, covetous looks, sat as if it were quite natural to be wearing a salt-stained wetsuit at a café table.

Abruptly, she set her cup down. "We must go to the party."

"It begins so early?"

She laughed. "It began three days ago. God knows when it'll end. People come and go; some go and don't come back, and others arrive. It's fast becoming a way of life, or at least a state of mind." She looked up. "There. My bodyguard is always punctual."

Arion looked up too. An aircar was settling between the dusty crowns of the palms.

Like an overblown crimson bloom, the huge tent wallowed amongst dark pines. Their aircar had arrived with a flock of others, and as they walked within an exuberant crowd towards the gold-rimmed entrance, Dominik told Arion, "Remember to show yourself. And if anyone asks, tell them I brought you." She gave him a sudden, surprising kiss, said breathlessly, "Will you do that?" and darted through the crowd: it closed over her like a skin.

Arion hesitated, and a fat man brushed past, talking loudly to an old woman in a silver wrap. Arion followed them beneath the arch.

Inside, the tent seemed even bigger than it had from the air, two stories at least to the billowing ceiling. Islands of lush vegetation made a random archipelago across the sea of white carpet. The floor wasn't level, but hollowed and hummocked as if laid over natural contours of the ground. People strolled or stood or sat. The air was filled with the hum of their conversation, like the drone of the bees Arion had tended as a boy, undercut by the insistent beat of bocksa. A moment later Arion saw, small in the distance, the pulsing light fantasy which accompanied the music. Bright-plumaged birds threaded the upper air with raucous cries.

Most of the people were surely golden, dressed in elegant or improbable costumes, but enough wore everyday clothes for Arion not to feel out of place. He saw a mechanic in a leather jacket, its sleeve torn off to show her glittering augmented arm, as he vaguely looked for food. But there only seemed to be drinks laid out on the scattered flat-topped stones. He picked up a glass and sipped, then grimaced at the liquor's sweetness and set it back. And walked on, absorbed in the fragmented chatter:

"Not really her daughter, you didn't know that? That's why she's so upset the girl ran off." "You mean a clone? Isn't that illegal here?" "Sold everything and bought a place in an ark bound for some godforsaken world where he'll spend the rest of his life behind an oxbone plow if he's *lucky*." "Not on Serenity, Elysium." "Agatherin's up again, but isn't it always?" "Talk about letting the Alea start an embassy here is pure nonsense put about by the apologists. You only have to know what their lifecycle's like: I mean, they eat half their children." "You simply must stop drinking, my dear. It may have been *comme il faut* to throw up over the other guests fifty years ago but these days it simply isn't done."

Arion sidestepped the swaying, whitefaced woman and ducked under a

fringe of glossy leaves.

The man seated beside the pool looked around. Beneath a mop of white hair, his face creased like old leather about a jutting nose. His clothes were black: black vest vee'd over a boney chest, baggy black trousers, black boots.

"I'm sorry," Arion said. "I didn't realise anyone was here."

"I by no means own it." The man's smile was abrupt, netting his eyes in wrinkles. They were dark eyes, as sadly sapient as an ape's. He added, "Novaya Rosya. I am correct?"

"Sure." Arion sat on a flat stone and the ache in his lower back spread, became a generalised exhaustion. Tardily, he realised that the pebbly texture of the man's boots was that of zithsa hide. "You've been there?"

"Oh no, oh no." The man laughed. "No, my boots were a gift. From a friend, when I was much younger. I have never left Earth, much to my regret. My name is Pixot, Doctor Pixot."

"Arion Arakavoi." Then he remembered, and added, "Dominiq brought me." And wondered where she was.

Doctor Pixot nodded sagely. "That competition, I suppose."

"Someone brought you too?"

"Either you know nothing of the circles you have entered, my friend, or you are an adept. From your expression, I would gather the former. So it is all right to tell you why I am here. Simply, because I was asked. I know some of the golden — you do call them that on Novaya Rosya? — from the time when I used to live in Sao Paulo. A few weeks ago one of them passed through the little mountain town where I practice now, and I've been traveling with him ever since." He shrugged elegantly. "Of course, it is more complicated than that, but we will not go into it here. You, I suppose, are a freespacer. I would have thought Dominiq had more imagination — she's younger than most of them. Unless you really can play that strung computer you're carrying."

Arion shrugged.

The doctor leaned closer. "Have you just arrived?" His breath smelled of ashes and honey.

"At the party?"

"On Earth."

"On Earth, and at the party."

"And you came from?"

"From Ruby." Arion was uneasy now; the doctor's eager seeking expression reminded him of the wretches who sometimes haunted spacefields, drawn by the glamor of space travel but lacking the necessary talent or wealth.

The doctor closed his eyes. "Ah, Ruby. The Crystal Sea with its singing formations of quartz, scoured clean by enormous gales each winter." He nodded, and opened his eyes. "I envy you, young man. You have a quality of freedom only otherwise enjoyed by the very rich. Half the people at this

party will have left Earth in a week; the rest probably won't be within a thousand kays of this place. Do you know the story of the eagle and the wren?"

"They are birds, yes?"

"Very good." Doctor Pixot was looking at the shallow pool, the white pebbles that quivered beneath the distorting skin. "The Earth is the fountain-head of all stories, it is said. You in the colonies haven't invented the language to even describe your worlds yet, much less confabulate what you've found." He slowly and stiffly clambered to his feet, and picked up a small black bag. "Enjoy the party, young man, while you still can."

Arion watched the doctor push through the shrubbery, then shucked his lyre from his shoulder and stretched. Then he ground his fists into his eyes until he saw stars and lay on the flat stone beside the water. He awoke with a shudder and didn't know what time it was. The crimson folds of the ceiling glowed with sourceless illumination; the party hummed beyond the leafy circle.

He rinsed his mouth with a handful of water from the pool and sat back on his heels. He didn't belong here and it would be simple to leave — except he didn't know where Galveston was, or how far away. Except there might be the chance to see more of Earth.

He shouldered his lyre and re-entered the party.

Now the scattered stones bore metal goblets filled with a smoking wine that stung Arion's eyes as much as his mouth when he sipped. The goblet in his fist trailing vapor like a comet, he wandered towards a crowd gathered beyond a stand of shaggy-boled cycads (a parrot blinked its coral-rimmed eye, ruffled gorgeous scarlet and yellow feathers, as he passed).

Some in the encircling crowd were clapping, others stamped their feet: an insistent heavy beat simplifying the polyphonic rhythms of the bocksa. In their center, two fighters circled cautiously, their knives weaving back and forth. They were naked but for breechcloths, their oiled bodies gleaming. Arion entered the watching circle and saw that one of the fighters was a woman, her breasts little more than enlarged nipples on her muscular chest. The second thing he saw: the fighters were roped together, left wrist to left wrist.

The man lunged and the woman parried, *snick-snick* as the knives slid against each other. Then they were circling again.

Duels were legal on Novaya Rosya, and Arion had seen enough knife-work to know that the fighters here were mostly faking it. None of the other watchers seemed to realise this, to judge by their enthusiastic comments and advice, or perhaps they simply didn't care.

The fighters suddenly clashed, broke apart. There was blood on the man's right forearm now. Arion sipped stinging wine and felt the fumes mount to his head. Whatever the time, he hadn't eaten for at least a day. He took another sip from the goblet, looked around and discovered a clutter of glasses

nearby; the sweet white wine scoured the bitterness from his teeth.

Arion looked back at the fighters in time to see the man throw himself sideways, tugging the woman with him; as she reeled offbalance he kicked out and she fell. A moment later he was kneeling over her, the point of his knife at her throat. The crowd's clapping staggered, became applause.

The man cut the cord that bound him to the woman, helped her to her feet. They bowed, then turned and walked through the circle.

As the crowd began to break up, Arion drained his glass and dropped it, brought up his lyre and slashed a chord from the strings. A few turned to watch, and he caught the laugh of one girl in the melody, so that her eyes widened in recognition. His left hand hailed bright notes; his right parodied the heartbeat claps (the most basic human rhythm) that had accompanied the fighting. Some people began to clap again, but a moment later the bocksa was shut off and the clapping petered out.

Arion, his thoughts suspended somewhere between his head and his fingers, flung the melody across the tent like the single line an artist might use to describe a portrait: the portrait was his memory of Dominiq's face at the instant the mask had left it. More people were gathering. He grinned and leapt to the top of the flat stone, scattering glasses. Eyes closed, feet astride, Arion played.

As he brought the four-part improvisation to a close, he realised that Dominiq was standing beside him. And wondered, as his fingers staggered across the frets to stab out the closing notes, reiterating the opening, how long she had been standing there, and if she realised what his inspiration had been.

People laughed and clapped, and he gave a little half-bow, stepped from his plinth. "That was wonderful!" Dominiq clutched his arm, her grin wide. She was wearing something long, flowing, and white. "I knew you'd be my champion," she said.

As most of the crowd began to drift away, a few began to gravitate towards Arion and Dominiq. He recognised Doctor Pixot, a moment later (something thrilled like a plucked wire) Antonio. A dark-skinned, amazingly tall man took Dominiq's hand and said, "The clear winner," and a woman in a wispy wrap nodded rapidly, her eyes swarming over Arion's face. He looked away and met Antonio's scowl.

Dominiq said, "Even you have to admit it, Antonio!"

"I admit nothing," the man said smoothly. "That is the secret of my success."

The tall man released Dominiq's hand. "But he clearly is the best. Congratulations, Dominiq. Once again, we are all devastated by your sensibility."

Dominiq tilted her head in a regal gesture of acceptance.

Arion watched her, puzzled and hurt, then slung his lyre on his shoulder. He had played and she had won?

Slowly, with much noise, the little group moved towards the far end of the tent, where half a dozen musicians were playing grave waltzes. Dominiq showed Arion the simple steps that went with the music and they whirled off like a double star to the applause of the others.

"You do this very well," Dominiq said, her voice intimate in his ear. A clear perfume rose from the warm cleft between her breasts. Arion could feel her curled fist in the small of his back; her other hand, hot and dry, enclosed his.

"Thank you, Seyoura."

"I must thank you, for your music. That was something you wrote?"

"Something I made up." He still felt faintly resentful.

"Really. You're more talented than I thought."

Arion shrugged in her arms, the tips of his ears warming in embarrassment.

A hand touched his shoulder, and Antonio said roughly, "This is an excuse-me, freespacer."

Uncertainly, Arion let Dominiq go. She told Antonio, "Just one dance, if you insist." She blew a kiss to Arion, said, "I'll see you in a minute. Don't run away."

Arion crossed to the hummock in the carpeted floor where he had set down his lyre. A burly man had picked it up and was studying it. His face . . . Half was a taut glistening sheet. A live blue eye peered from a kind of curved slit; the nose was half-caved in. He held out the lyre, and remarked, "You played up quite a storm back there."

Arion took it, trying and not succeeding to avoid looking at that ruined face.

"It plays right inside your head. Odd. You've had it long?"

"Yes, Seyour." It had been his father's, the only thing he'd inherited from that quiet, solitary man.

"A piece of advice, if I may. If you want to keep playing, stay away from Dominiq. Antonio brought her, and he's never unlearned jealousy."

"Seyour? I —"

"She's bored with Antonio — I'll admit he's not very interesting. She's looking to escape, and she'll use you to do it, freespacer. You're out of your depth."

"This Antonio owns her?"

The man's smile was twisted awry. "Don't be angry. Of course he doesn't, but he has power. Oh, probably too much, and unlearned, but it's his."

"Can I ask, Seyour. Did you bring Doctor Pixot with you?"

That twisted smile. "I don't have any pets. Pixot is Cortazar's." He nodded towards the tall black man. "Make sure you don't become one, freespacer." He nodded again, and walked off.

Arion looked after him, then at Dominiq, still circling with Antonio to the music. In the other direction was a flat stone bearing racks of smoking meat.

Something seemed to tear apart in his gut: he was that hungry.

The chunked meat was skewered with crisp, sharp-tasting vegetables. He was demolishing his second skewer when Dominiq came up, exclaiming, "You're hungry! I didn't think."

He licked juice running down his wrist. "This is good."

"So I see." Then she laughed. "I saw you having a serious discussion a moment ago."

He tore off another chunk of meat, and said around it, "That fellow is a friend of yours?"

"In a way. He is Talbeck, Duke Barlstilkin V. From Elysium. He could buy us all out, and I mean everyone here. We use agatherin: he *grows* it."

"How did he get . . . the way he is?"

"His face. It happened years ago, when the Federation was bringing together the old colonies, when agatherin was discovered. You know what it is?"

"A plant, grows only in one part of Elysium."

"Actually, it's a plant disease, a virus that is changed by the plant it infects. Those changes make it expensive to synthesise, easier to cultivate — in the right conditions. When it was discovered, men like Talbeck's father suddenly became immensely wealthy, and immensely powerful. The Federation wanted to control them by forming the Foundation of Youth combine, but Talbeck's father refused. So the Federation laid siege to the castle. Talbeck's father was killed, and Talbeck was . . . hurt. He still bears a grudge against the Federation, and that scar is like a badge."

"And does he bear you a grudge?"

"Me?" She laughed. "What did he say?"

Arion shrugged, suddenly uncomfortable.

"Talbeck means well, but he can be overbearing. Don't let him upset you." She gestured grandly, the white material of her dress unfolding like a wing. "We must enjoy this party."

Arion awoke with diffuse sunlight across his face and felt motion beneath the soft cushions amongst which he sprawled, a slow swaying. A headache pressed against his forehead; his mouth was coated. And he was naked. He looked around: walls and ceiling panelled with raw silk, golden sunlight pouring through on one side. There was no sign of Dominiq, or of his lyre.

He remembered the rest of the party, fragments shuffled like a spilt pack of cards. They had danced again and he had sipped from glass after glass of wine while Dominiq bantered with her friends. He had not felt excluded, for the intoxication of his playing had lived like electricity in his spine. At last Dominiq had gripped his arm and whispered, "Come with me." And he had followed. Presumably here. Where, presumably, they had made love. That memory was fogged by his hangover.

He was wondering if he should get up and find out where Dominiq was —

or at least find out what had happened to his clothes — when one of the silk panels twitched aside and a woman in severe grey coveralls entered, walking with a pliant bending motion. She carried his clothes, washed and neatly pressed.

Embarrassed, he took them and thanked her. But she said nothing and stood quite still, quite expressionless, as he dressed. Only as he was fastening his belt did he notice the twin terminals glittering at her temples. He'd seen those on Pandora, where criminals wired for computer control served out their sentences in community service. Here, criminals were servants?

He asked the woman where his lyre was and got no reply, then asked about the Seyoura Dominiq. The woman gestured for him to follow, and led him along a vertiginous catwalk between an array of bulging translucent cells that seemed to enclose only air and dazzling sunlight. At the end of the catwalk he ducked through a hatch into open air. There was a wide platform. At the far end Dominiq turned from the rail.

"Finally. You had too much to drink last night. I suppose you're not used to such vintages." She was amused.

"I don't usually drink so much," he admitted.

"Come," she said. "See where you are."

At her side, he leaned on the rail and looked out. Far below was a sea not of water but green grass. It stretched away in every direction beneath a flawless sky, broken here and there by clumps of trees.

"The Badlands," Dominiq said, "but why they're called that I don't know. They look well enough to me."

The sun was behind them, and Arion could see the huge transparent shadow of the thing they were travelling on, flickering as it passed over invisible contours. He gestured and asked, "What is this?"

"A dirigible. You really don't remember very much, do you? What a pity —" her voice swung down "— because you were very sweet." And up. "We're on our way to Los Angeles." Her expression was teasing, and he flushed in embarrassment. She asked, "Yes, very sweet," and drew a proprietary finger over the lacing of his vest.

"Your friends are here too?"

"Oh no. They'll make their own way. Just us, and my servant."

Arion remembered the woman in grey coveralls. She was standing still beside the hatch. "Is she really under control?" he asked.

"Yes. It's expensive, but they make the best servants."

"On Pandora they were used to further public works."

"Oh, on Pandora." She dismissed this implied rebuke with a shrug. "The money I pay for her is used by the authorities for that purpose here, so where is the difference?" More sharply, she said, "Is there anything else." It was obvious that she wasn't used to being questioned.

"My lyre. I couldn't find it when —"

"Oh, I'm sure it's around," she said carelessly. "You must serenade me as



we cross the plains. Perhaps you can draw down the wild birds?"

"I don't know. I've never tried."

She laughed. "Then you must!"

They sailed above the plain all day. Arion sat at the rail and watched it slowly pour beneath the dirigible's keel. Sometimes old roads showed as darker lines in the green and once there was the pattern of an old town, a maze overwhelmed by grass. Otherwise each kilometer was indistinguishable from the next. It didn't matter to Arion, just as his virtual abduction didn't matter. This was Earth, the Earth he had so often dreamed about, its great landscapes imprinted everywhere with the indelible marks of history.

He and Dominiq ate dinner as the sun slowly subsided into thin slabs of cloud above the level horizon. The woman served them silently and efficiently, always with the same dispassionate expression, a kind of remote calm. She made Arion uneasy, and he wondered whether she felt anything, thought anything. The computer surely overrode her cortical activity, but was there some kernel of awareness beneath?

Dominiq noticed his unease and said, "Don't worry, she's quite safe. Watch." She drew a control pad from a fold in her flowing dress and raised it: the servant stepped jerkily from the corner where she had been waiting. Tongue-tip caught between her lips, Dominiq manipulated the controls and the servant performed a brief jerky dance.

"All right," Arion said. He felt suddenly cold.

Dominiq shrugged and dismissed the servant, stowed away the control pad. "I just don't want anything to spoil the trip," she said.

Later they sipped icy liqueurs. Arion contemplated the vast, still night and listened politely to Dominiq's animated chatter, nodding, agreeing. And later still they made love. He found her a skillful, considerate partner, surely the best of the few women he had known. Yet he was not so inexperienced as not to realise that she was withholding some part of herself. Her body was lithe and smooth-skinned and wholly delightful, but he felt as if she were playing it as she had played her servant, and playing him in turn, almost as if her intelligence were a third party to the act. Afterwards the slight rocking of the gondola, and the fumes of the wine and liqueurs, sent him to sleep, and ended his muzzy speculations.

The next day Dominiq stayed with him on the platform, telling him something of the history of the land they were drifting above, of the Age of Waste, of the war and the cancer plagues which had decimated the population. Beneath her arch playfulness was an immense reserve of knowledge. He also learnt something of how she made her living (which is not to say how she earned her money, but what she did to pass the time), helping run her family's empire, immense holdings in mining (they owned the orthidium mining station at the Sirian Trojans) and lesser interests in transport, smelting and a double handful of other concerns.

That afternoon they hove to above the ruins of a small town at the inter-

section of two of the old highways. The dirigible sank, and they climbed through a hatch and down a rope ladder to the ground, accompanied by the servant, a pellet rifle slung on her shoulder. Dominiq had told Arion, playfully, "You don't know what kind of strange animals might be found here."

"I thought everything was harmless."

"Of course not. There are leopards and cougars, and some off-world creatures around too, no doubt. People bring them in for menageries and of course some escape. Most don't live long, but a few flourish."

"Zithsa?"

"Not that I know. Banshees from Ruby, treesnappers from Pandora, a few others."

So Arion followed the servant down the ladder with a certain trepidation, but the only animals they saw were a couple of small antelope that jinked off over the scrubby bushes growing from a fallen slab of wall. All around, something filled the air with an incessant stridulation; like the heat it seemed to be woven into the landscape. The solid ground felt strange to Arion; it was as if his knees were unhinged.

Most of the buildings were little more than hummocks in the waist-high grass, delineating the abbreviated cruciform shape of the old town. The dry heat drew sweat from Arion's face, and maps of sweat grew under the servant's armpits and across her back. Yet Dominiq seemed unaffected, strolling coolly amongst the grassy ruins in loose linen trousers and a halter, her bare shoulders gleaming.

The dirigible hung behind them, the catwalk visible within its transparent glistening hull like a notochord, the drive and service pods like organs: the larva of some gigantic sky creature. Once Arion glimpsed an aircar twinkling high above it like a daytime star; when he pointed it out, Dominiq said that was her bodyguard, and suddenly he wondered how large was the network of which she was the center.

They walked on, and disturbed a covey of birds which whirred up from a clump of bushes and circled high. Dominiq took the rifle from the servant and fired. The shots seemed perfunctory and harmless, and the birds soon mounted out of sight. "Grouse," Dominiq explained. "Good to eat."

It came to Arion then that everything here was kin to him: the grass under his boots, the wiry bushes, the hidden stridulators, the birds, all had evolved from the same primordial soup. It was a dizzying thought.

He hurried to catch up with Dominiq and her servant, and saw more birds fly up. Dominiq snapped the rifle to her shoulder and fired. A bird flapped sideways and dropped. Dominiq handed back the rifle and grinned at Arion.

"Did you see where it fell?"

"Beyond the hillock, there."

"Go fetch it for me?"

He had to search the long grass for several minutes before he found the corpse. It was lighter than he had expected, and when he gingerly raised it

by one naked leg the wings fell open with a dry rustle. A star of blood stained its breast.

He walked back down the path he had trampled, holding the trophy high. Dominiq studied it for a moment, then turned aside and said, "Throw it away."

"I thought —"

"Throw it away!" When he had pitched it into the grass, she added, "It was a silly thing to do. I don't think I could get the servant to handle it, God knows the computer couldn't." Her face was white, and when she smiled Arion imagined the skull beneath. "It's not that I'm fussy. Do you know, there are tribes out here. Sometimes you see their skin tents, or their horses. One year I'm going to live with them, like a goddess come down from the sky. . . ."

Arion shrugged. Her talk often took unexpected turns like this.

"Well," she said. "Let's go back and get on — or we'll never get to Los Angeles in time."

The voyage lasted three more days, but they did not land again. The grasslands were broken by a vast river that meandered in silver loops amongst swampy forest, and soon after the grass began to fail, red earth showing through like the scalp beneath the sparse hair of an old woman. Once they saw a herd of horses wheeling away from the shadow of the dirigible, and Dominiq told Arion to try and draw them back by his playing.

He had not touched his lyre in all that time, yet even before he began the music seemed to leap into his mind, a wild drumming, mounting and mounting. Dominiq clapped as the horses turned below, led by a white stallion. She spoke to the computer and the dirigible sank towards its shadow. Now Arion could see the stallion's streaked heaving flanks, his wild rolling eye; and abruptly he stopped playing. The horse shook his head and angled away, raising dust as the rest of his herd followed.

"You're sure you've never done that before?" Dominiq was leaning over the edge of the platform's rail in a way that made Arion nervous. She turned to grin at him. "It was incredible."

"I've never done it with animals, but I've never really been where there are animals. Once, I stopped a fight — or at least I like to think that's what happened." He told her the story, and she smiled.

"Have you ever been tested for psi? Perhaps you have a Talent."

"I don't think so."

"I can easily arrange it. After Los Angeles we could go up to the Institute's orbital station. The director is an acquaintance of my mother's."

"I'd rather not." Arion was uneasy now.

She faced him directly, her blue eyes flashing. "You're like all freespacers. No ambition, no desire to *do* anything. You go from world to world, and that's *all* you do."

He shrugged.

"Don't you ever want to do anything except that?"

"I —" He was confused. After he had passed the tests to gain entrance to the Academy, after he had become a freespacer, what had he wanted? He remembered wanting to get away from the little settlement where he had been born. The usual way out had been to become a zithsa hunter, but his parents had been against that, and without their sponsorship there had been no way he could have joined any of the outfits that worked the Lowlands from the settlement (it was that small a place). But he'd passed the tests, got out that way. Out and up and never back. He said, "I always wanted to see Earth."

"And now you have. Well, you're lucky not to need so much."

"But you can do anything you want, have anything."

"Well, I can't live for ever," she said carelessly.

"Longer than most."

"It's not the same. As for things, they aren't everything. People like me, golden (of course I know what we're called, don't look embarrassed) are highly visible at the times when what we're doing is the least characteristic of our activities. We do work, at least most of us do. Half the year I'm making deals, most of the rest I'm at sites. I even get my hands dirty once in a while." She extended them. They were slim, with long nails treated with something that broke light into every color of the spectrum. "You freespacers, now, you do go where you want."

"No." He remembered Doctor Pixot. "We just take what there is. You can wait for something to come up, but you can't wait that long. You have to keep moving if you want to keep eating."

"You know, I envy you. You're not tied down to things. Possessions bind you. You think I own those mines I told you about? They own me. I mean, what do you have apart from your lyre that's important to you. What did you leave behind in Galveston?"

He shrugged.

"It takes a kind of strength to live like that." She lightly rested her manicured hand on his arm. "I do envy you that . . . sometimes. I won't ask you to change if you don't want to."

He had to thank her.

The grass gave out to desert, a baked red crust supporting little more than creosote bushes. Ahead were mountains, their peaks hidden in cloud, their flanks flashing with snow. Despite the inertia field that protected the observation platform, it grew colder. Arion wrapped a blanket around his shoulders and watched for hours as the dirigible drifted above fields of white. Here and there stripped skeletons of pines poked through the blanketing snow, remains of forests overwhelmed by the cold. Dominiq told him that the climate had been devastated by weather manipulation during the war.

Beyond the mountains was more desert, then a final, lower range. That night the dirigible drifted through a high pass; wind whined and kept Arion in a fitful state of half waking, half dreaming. When he came out onto the platform the next morning there was a line of blue at the horizon: the Pacific Ocean.

That evening, they came to Los Angeles.

It was a small fishing town stretched across a hilly promontory, facing a huge circular bay to the west and backed by a long, shallow marsh. White houses straggled either side of narrow streets that led back from the long waterfront where brightly painted boats rocked.

Arion and Dominiq walked through the stench of the fish that women were gutting with long knives (blood and silver scales crusting their bare arms), through the smoke of the curing houses. Nets strung between poles were attended by men who sat on small stools as they wove repairs in the level evening light. Only a few of the fisherfolk turned to watch them pass.

They climbed one of the streets that rose away from the harbor. Dominiq walked with an eager thrusting pace, and Arion's lyre bumped his shoulder as he kept up with her. There was a square with a central fountain, a spouting dolphin (Arion recognised the beast he had called to shore on the other side of the continent) plashing water into a circle of scallop shells. Tables were scattered beside it, and some of the golden from the party (Dominiq ran forward) sat around one: Talbeck Barlstilkin, the side of his ruined face glistening in the light of a nearby glotube, black Clemens Cortazar, small, elegant Cloe Muti, burly, bearded Efram Oberhagen, half a dozen others. And Antonio, who smiled lazily as Arion came up behind Dominiq, and said to her, "You still have your pet, I see."

Dominiq told him, "You're being silly." Arion stood awkwardly at her shoulder. To the others, brightly, "Well, what have you all been doing? Surely not sitting here drinking!"

"We've just been to see the bulls run in," someone said.

"Late again." Clemens Cortazar added in his low soft voice, and everybody but Antonio laughed.

Doctor Pixot, rising and offering Dominiq his seat, said, "We were wondering when you would get here in that thing of yours. There are reports of storms in the Rockies."

"Oh, but we didn't come that way." Dominiq sat, and looked around delightedly.

"Ask about the bulls," Cloe Muti said.

"Well, how were the bulls?" Everyone laughed again, even Antonio this time. She had become the cynosure of the group. Arion stood awkwardly for a moment, then went around the group and sat on the rim of the fountain.

Cortazar and Oberhagen started to talk at once, but Cloe Muti's shrill voice overrode them: "It was something, Dominiq! Really something. The

way they came all in a crowd down the street, like a force of nature. Mind you, I liked the look of some of the gauchos escorting them too. Do people really dance with the bulls, though? I can't believe it. Dance between those horns?"

"I told you," Antonio said sullenly. He was watching Dominiq.

Cloe Muti pressed her plump hands together. "Well, I'm so glad I came. Some people said it was nothing but a bunch of ephemerals running about with some cows. But those bulls." Her shudder was artful. "So fierce."

"It is a tragedy," Talbeck Barlstilkin said in his measured, patient way, "in which danger is introduced, defined, and surmounted. After the dancers have worn the bulls into submission, they are ritually slaughtered. Perhaps your friends were afraid of the ceremony, for it is a celebration of death."

"Oh, death! Who of us is afraid of death?" In the silence, Cloe Muti's laugh seemed shrill, and to cover it she added, "Do any of the dancers ever get killed?"

"Not the dancers, or very rarely," Talbeck Barlstilkin told her. "But sometimes the villagers die in the carnival beforehand. Always some are injured."

"Carnival? And what is that?"

"Before the main event, a couple of yearling bulls are sent in amongst a crowd of men, who try to show their daring, their prowess, their courage, by fixing ribbons to the horns."

"It's very funny," Antonio said.

"I suppose it is, in a way." Barlstilkin sounded as if this were a strange, novel thought.

Dominiq laughed. "Dear Cloe. You will enjoy tomorrow, I promise. Aren't there any drinks to be had?"

"I'll go," Doctor Pixot volunteered, and trotted over to the terrace where men lounged around a lighted bar.

Antonio leaned in his chair and said to Arion, "Lend me that thing of yours."

"Seyour?"

"Here." Antonio grabbed the lyre. Surprised, Arion clutched the strap, but the golden tugged hard and it snapped through his fingers. "Don't worry," Antonio said, "I won't hurt it. I know a little about these things. This is the directional control?"

"Seyour, it is dangerous. . . ." Arion's heart was pounding; his cheeks flamed.

"Nonsense." Antonio fiddled with a control, then glanced up, watching Doctor Pixot as he started across the square, a bottle in either hand. Antonio's left hand rose.

And struck the fretted strings!

Pixot stopped as if transfixed. The bottles smashed at his feet. Antonio hunched over the lyre and his fingers slashed, slashed again. Pixot's arms raised and he began to jog in an awkward dance, turning and turning, his

raised arms shaking. Someone laughed, and Arion leaned over Antonio's shoulder and switched off the lyre. The doctor collapsed like a hamstrung puppet, then began to raise himself to his hands and knees, panting hard.

"Don't worry, freespacer. I haven't harmed it." Antonio fixing him with a look of contempt as he handed the lyre back.

"That's something," someone said, and Antonio shrugged casually, smugly. What Arion felt now was hate.

Doctor Pixot had returned to the bar. Now he set two bottles of wine on the table and sat beside Arion on the fountain rim. Arion felt a surge of embarrassment, hot and tender, and said in a low hoarse voice, "I'm sorry."

"Ah, it does not matter. You learn to ignore these things when you're with the golden."

Arion wondered what other humiliations Pixot had endured. He asked at random, "What is an ephemeral?"

The doctor's wrinkled forehead wrinkled more. "They don't mean anything by it."

"But what is it?"

"It's just what they call us. Because we grow older, change, and they don't." He nodded. "I never did tell you that story."

Arion had forgotten. Doctor Pixot explained, "About the wren and the eagle."

"Oh. No, you didn't."

The doctor leaned closer, his hands on the knees of his black trousers. "In older times the eagle was the king of the birds, but like most kings his rule became lax, and at last some of the birds (it was chiefly the idea of that mischief-maker the jackdaw) disputed his right to rule. The eagle at first thought only of killing the members of this deputation, strangling them with his great clawed foot as he strangled his prey, but his chancellor, a horned owl, saw that this would only create martyrs, and advised that the eagle challenge them to a contest: whoever could fly highest would rule.

"The eagle agreed, and the contest was declared. Birds flew from all parts of the Earth to watch; and the sky was dark for days with their passage. At last the delegation and the eagle gathered on a high ledge, and at a signal from the horned owl all launched into the air.

"The eagle flew higher and higher, gathering wind in his mighty pinions and circling beyond the height of the jackdaw, of the hawk, even of the terat-ornis, whose wingspan was five times his. Higher and higher until the stars came out despite the sun, and the wind was so cold and thin that his breath all but failed. And as he was about to descend in triumph a tiny wren, who at the jackdaw's instigation had been hiding in the feathers of the eagle's back, fluttered up just beyond his reach, uttered a single note as forlorn as a star, and died. And so the birds were left without a king, and lost the rule of the Earth."

Some of the golden were laughing at a joke of Cloe Muti's: Dominiq had

tipped back her head, her bronze hair falling straight down her back. Arion, watching her, said, "It's a nice story, but does it mean anything?"

"Well. It means what you want it to mean. That's the value of that kind of story." Doctor Pixot peered at Arion through the gloom. "You colonists will have to make up your own stories quickly if you've lost the meaning of Earth's. Of course, on Earth stories have returned to the world again. We all live out the past here."

Arion shrugged. He was not happy; but for Dominiq he would have left. He looked at her again — she was talking in quick low tones to Talbeck Barlstilkin — and sighed, understanding that it would be hours before he could sleep.

They slept that night in a room above the café, in a sour-smelling, sagging bed. Arion was awoken at dawn by the solemn beat of drums. Dominiq stirred drowsily beside him, her hair bunched on the pillow. Someone knocked on the door and Talbeck Barlstilkin's voice called: "We're going out."

Arion threw off the sheet and padded naked across the tiled floor, opened the shutter a crack. It was an overcast day. People were setting up stalls in the shadowed square; children were dodging about the spouting dolphin. The café was open, for directly below he could see the heads of the men clustered at the bar.

Dominiq stirred, and he turned. "Come back to bed," she said. "It'll be an hour at least before there's anything happening."

"There are a lot of people about already."

She smiled and stretched lazily. "Oh, come on. We must start the day properly." The sheet fell from her breasts and Arion stepped forward, his mouth suddenly dry with desire.

Dominiq asked, "Will you stay with me, when the festival is over?"

"I would have thought you wanted to stay with your friends." Sweat was cooling along his flanks. He lay on his back and looked at the shadowy plaster ceiling. Dominiq placed a hand on his chest, its nails pressing his smooth skin. Her face was centimeters from his.

"They're not exactly friends, just people who frequent the same places as I do. That's all. And I'd like you to come with me, if you want to. You could pilot my yacht."

He breathed out. "Of course. If it's possible."

"Oh, anything's possible."

He smiled. "And you'd rather be with me than your own kind?"

"We're only people, we're no different really."

No, he thought, it wasn't true. Golden were not at all like ordinary men and women.

"You look serious. What is it?"



"I was just wondering what was going on outside."

"Oh. . . ." She growled in mock frustration; her nails dug his chest. "You're so *impatient*."

"I may not come here again. I don't want to miss out on anything."

"It happens every year." She rolled from the bed and began to throw his clothes at him. He ducked, and one of his boots clattered into a corner; he caught his vest, his trousers. "Well, come on," she said, laughing.

The little town had come alive. Stalls were strung along the steep streets, selling all kinds of food, religious images, caged birds, wooden toys. Between the stalls, aborigines in serapes squatted beside blankets on which they had set little piles of fruit and vegetables.

Arion and Dominiq stopped at a stall and breakfasted on seafood (the first Arion had ever tasted) fried in soft batter; at another they drank bitter coffee from tiny copper cups. A bell began to toll, hollow and bronze beneath the clouds.

"The dancers are going towards the stadium," Dominiq cried.

They hurried on, hand in hand. Vehicles like cheap copies of an aircar but with wheels were drawn up along one side of a large square; Dominiq bartered with the driver of one and they clambered inside. There was a grinding roar, a jerk and a whiff of alcohol, and the vehicle was nosing up a street amongst the crowds. Dominiq shouted over the noise, "Los Angeles is famous for these!"

Soon they were in the countryside and the vehicle accelerated, passing people on foot in a cloud of dust. Arion began to feel faintly sick: the fumes and the unpredictable lurching, the dizzily wheeling scenery. The driver nonchalantly steered one-handedly, leaning an arm on the sill of the door's window. The place was *famous* for these crazy contraptions?

At last they shuddered to a halt at the foot of a long concrete stair that tunneled up between massy trees. Dominiq sprang out, threw a note to the driver, and started up the stairs, Arion at her side. Most of the people ascending with them were in family groups, the women carrying bundles of food, the men with leather sacks of wine over their shoulders. Children dodged excitedly amongst them and Dominiq grinned at Arion, as excited as any child.

Dominiq stopped at the head of the stairs, people dividing around her as she scanned the wedge of the grassy slope that descended towards the white ring, where men ran in confusion. Dominiq clutched Arion's arm and said, "They have a bull out already."

"I thought you said nothing would be happening," he said teasingly.

"Well, we dallied longer than I had intended. Not —" she stepped closer and kissed his cheek "— that I mind. Oh, look at that!"

Something lithe and black twisted through the scattering crowd in the ring, its head down as it pursued a single running figure. Then the man was over the perimeter wall and the bull was hooking furiously at the wood.

There was laughter and clapping from the people watching. The bull spun neatly and ran back, scattering the men again. "That one," Dominiq said. "Watch."

One of the men was running towards the bull, running at an angle so that he met the animal just past the center of the ring. There was a flash of scarlet and then the bull was running on with something trailing from its horn. The man stood still in the center, his arms raised in triumph as people on the slope clapped and hooted in approval.

"Well, that's over," Dominiq said. As they started down the slope, the men in the ring began to scramble over the perimeter wall and something flashed in the entrance tunnel. The bull galloped towards it and disappeared into the shadows. Then the gate closed and the white ring was empty.

People were showing elaborately printed cards to pass through the gate to the inner circle, tiers of stone seats separated from the ring by a kind of moat where sweating men awaited their next chance at glory, each clutching a scarlet ribbon. Dominiq nodded to the costumed guard, who bowed slightly and waved her and Arion through.

The other golden were already there, right at the edge. "I thought we'd be late," Dominiq cried, and ran forward into Cloe Muti's embrace. Someone passed her a bottle and she tilted it to her mouth, then handed it to Arion: stinging white wine. As he lowered the bottle, Arion saw Antonio at the edge of the crowd, clutching a bottle by its neck as he harangued Clemens Cortazar.

Arion sat next to Doctor Pixot and indicated the black bag at his feet. "I hope you don't have to use that."

"Oh, you mean the peasants. It's not for them. Besides, they have the most amazing constitutions."

Arion looked at the men below, at the white sand of the ring. The sun was beginning to burn through the grey tissue of cloud. Dominiq was talking with one of the golden, smiling and holding the man's hand, but he discovered that he didn't mind. He had had last night and the morning and all the days and nights of crossing the continent, and there was the promise of much more.

A shadow crossed Arion's face and he looked up. Antonio was standing over him. "Freelancer," he said, "I think you shouldn't be here."

Dominiq turned from her conversation and said, "Oh, it isn't anything to do with you, Antonio."

Antonio scowled, and drank from his bottle.

"Come on," someone said, "give me a chance with that."

Antonio grinned and wiped his lips. Arion frowned, then saw what Antonio was about to do and rolled left, the lyre catching under his arm, as the bottle shattered where he had been sitting. He felt rather than saw Antonio's foot lash out and rolled again, then kicked out and caught the golden's leg. Antonio staggered and Arion kicked out again. Antonio fell in stages, going

down on his knees, bumping a hip on the edge of the step and rolling over heavily.

"Christ," Efram Oberhagen said mildly, "he's been drinking all day."

"More like all night," Clemens Cortazar said and, stooping, helped Antonio up.

The golden was panting; one side of his face was scraped. He glared at Arion and said, "You should learn where you're not wanted, freespacer."

"You can be such a fool, Antonio," Dominiq said angrily. "I brought him: he's mine. So leave him be."

Antonio shrugged out of Cortazar's grip. "Then take him away," he said evenly, and lunged, his fist scraping Arion's chest and smacking into the lyre, knocking it from Arion's shoulder. Wires pinged when it struck the stone, and Arion turned with a cry. Antonio was breathing hard. "Go on back," he said.

Apart from a chip in the ivory inlay, the lyre was unharmed. Cradling it, Arion looked up and Talbeck Barlstilkin stepped smoothly in front of Antonio. "He'll be gone soon enough," he told the drunken golden. "Why don't you learn patience for once?"

"He's not worthy! What has he ever done to be here? With her? He's done nothing, he is nothing."

"Don't be silly," Dominiq said, and put her arm around Arion's shoulders. "I chose him — and remember who won the wager."

"What was he competing against then? A bunch of ephemerals picked out of the gutter . . . he doesn't measure against anything real. How about it, freespacer? Want to take me on?"

"Sure," Arion said, although despite his anger he thought the whole thing was silly. "But I won't fight you."

"Not a fight." Antonio swept an arm towards the ring. "Down there. You know what they do?"

Men were milling in the ring again, mostly keeping to the perimeter wall and all watching the shadowed gate. Others were climbing up from the moat, dropping onto the sand. "The bull comes out and they have to ring one of its horns with a ribbon to show what they call *machismo*. Think you can do that, freespacer? Without that noise-box of yours to charm the beast, of course. It will be a fair contest."

"No!" Dominiq clutched Arion's arm as he stood. "He isn't that stupid," she told Antonio. "And I didn't think you were either."

"Let them get on with it," someone called, and someone else said, "That's right. Leave them be, Dominiq."

"Well, freespacer? Or are you able to do only as you're told?"

"I'm my own man," Arion said. "I'll enter this duel, if you like."

"Duel?" Clemens Cortazar smiled. "That's good."

"You're both fools," Dominiq said. Her face was as white as it had been when Arion had brought her the bird she had shot. "Besides" — this almost

desperately — “you don’t have any of those ribbons.”

Antonio raised a mocking eyebrow, then reached into a trouser pocket and drew out a handful of scarlet.

In that moment Arion began to suspect that the golden had planned this all along, and his suspicion hardened after they had clambered over the wooden barrier that circled the ring. Now Antonio didn’t seem drunk at all. He handed Arion a loop of ribbon and said, “Over the horn, either one. A simple thing — even these peasants can do it.”

Arion saw amusement flicker in the golden’s face and began to feel afraid. The cold anger that had prompted his acceptance of the challenge was quite gone. How old was the golden, how many times had he played out this particular drama?

Antonio grinned, then shouldered past the sunburnt men who silently watched the gate. Minutes passed, and Arion wondered if it would ever open. His mouth was dry, but his palms grew slippery; like some of the others, he rubbed his hands in the sand. As he stood again, lightheaded, a drum rolled and the gate on the far side of the ring shot back.

The bull came out in a rush, a clot of shadow that solidified in an instant into the lithe black muscular creature. Sunlight glistened on the span of its yellow horns, on the hump of muscle of its shoulders.

A man stepped towards the bull, stamping his feet and calling hoarsely. The bull turned its head to regard him with one blood-shot eye. Then charged! The man ran, and the bull swept past him. Some men scrambled over the wall — Arion heard scattered laughter from the audience — as others closed on the bull from one side or another. Then the bull pirouetted neatly and ran back through the densest part of the crowd. Arion saw a man tossed into the air, seeming to balance on the tip of a horn before rolling off. There was blood on the horn now.

Arion edged away from the wall, his heart thumping. The bull turned again, knocking a man beneath its hooves, and Arion began to run at a sideways slant, more frightened of dropping the ribbon than of the bull. Then something hit his side and he fell, glimpsed Antonio running past. Just as Arion got to his feet golden and bull seemed to collide; then Antonio was rolling over on the sand, the bull hooking for him with its right horn, driving again and again into the sand, hitting the golden and hitting the sand, blood spattering as it shook its head before driving for the golden again.

Someone crashed into Arion, thrust something into his hands: his lyre. He almost dropped it. “Play!” Talbeck Barlstilkin said urgently. “Play!”

Arion understood. Terrified, he set the direction and struck the strings, welding note after note over a slow, rumbling beat. He stepped towards the bull and it reared its head, its eyes rolling. Its right horn was slick with blood. Arion struck hard, breaking a fingernail. The bull snorted, shuffled uncertainly. Now he had the rhythm of its rage, mimicked it for a moment, slowed it. The bull stepped towards him. He had it.

Arion began to move backwards as he played, step by step, terrified that he would trip. The bull followed, its head down. The hard planks of the wall struck Arion's back; he heaved his lyre over and scrambled up. A moment later the bull struck hard at the spot where he had been.

Men had carried Antonio's body over the side, laid it in the grassy moat beside the wall. The golden grouped around it as Doctor Pixot unpacked something transparent from his black bag. Grunting, the little man rolled the body onto the sheet and pulled the folds together, sealing them by running his thumb down the seam. "His head's intact anyhow," he said to no one in particular. "Get him cooled and get him to a hospital. Someone should call in their aircar." He cracked something inside the wrap and frost bloomed under the stiff folds, obscuring the bloody body.

The doctor stood with a sigh, and as if released, Dominiq whirled on Arion. "You!" she cried. "You did this to him!"

Arion flinched as she swung at him: her nails snagged his cheek. Then Clemens Cortazar was at her side and she wailed and collapsed against him.

"Dominiq —" Surprised, afraid, Arion stepped forward, but Talbeck Barlstilkin caught his arm. He had Arion's lyre again. Numbly, Arion allowed himself to be led away.

As they climbed the slope, Barstilkin said, "I'm afraid your instrument was messed up when you threw it over the wall."

He held it out and Arion took it. Two strings had broken and three keys were missing. The fret was loose in its socket. "It can be fixed, I suppose."

"It wasn't your fault. Antonio was a fool. He always has acted as if he were half his somatic age, and of course Dominiq turned his head. She's young, but she has a certain knack, it seems."

"I understand."

"It would be better if you left now, quietly. Someone might call in their bodyguard now the little game has been spoiled."

"This was a game? A man died down there."

"No doubt he will live again. Listen, freespacer. Our games are important. Surely you realize that." Barlstilkin's smile — on the half of his face that could smile — was ghastly. "These situations are set up because people have nothing better to do. Some of the others were setting Antonio up for this before you and Dominiq arrived."

"Listen, when Dominiq is calmer —"

"Don't be stupid, freespacer. She's not for you."

Arion took a shuddering breath, and felt as if he had been kicked in the stomach. His eyes banked with tears, shattering sunlight. "I cared for her," he told the older man. "You know that." And felt disgust because he hadn't been able to admit to love.

They reached the beginning of the descending stairs. "Some advice," Talbeck Barlstilkin said. "There's a monoline in the north of town. Runs all

the way to San Francisco. There's a spacefield there, not much, but you'll be able to find a berth I should think." He reached into his jacket pocket. "Here."

Arion thrust the money away without looking at it. "Can I ask — why do you go with them? I mean, you don't behave the way they do."

"And I'm not like you either. They understand me more than any ephemeral. You stay a freespacer and you'll see a lot more of us . . . the golden. You'll understand, boy."

"But you play too? You waste all you've got?"

"When you've had it for so long, what else is there to do?" Barlstilkin shrugged, then turned to walk away down the grassy slope towards the others. Arion looked after him, then started down the stairs.

The port at San Francisco was mostly Federation Navy, but after a week (he passed the time playing in a café in return for his meals and a place to sleep) Arion scooped a ride to Luna on an ore freighter. The next day he left the Solar System in a private yacht bound for Elysium.

And never came back.



*The author is an English cell biologist, currently working in Oxford after having spent a couple of years in Los Angeles. He has never had any of the weird jobs other writers boast of.*

*He does share a birthday with William Shakespeare.*

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**Story Editor of AMAZING STORIES™****by Bill Warren****Interview**

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If you have been going to science-fiction conventions almost anywhere in the United States over the last few years, and have attended programming on new movies, the chances are good that you've encountered Mick Garris. For several years, he was one of those people sent out by studios to show convention attendees advance scenes from upcoming movies. But Mick has harbored other ambitions. He was host of a cable-TV show on science-fiction films for Los Angeles' Z Channel, and wrote and produced a short (non-genre) film about the breakup of a marriage. He wrote several scripts (sold though unproduced, so far), but recently made an amazing leap ahead. Within the space of a few months, Mick sold a script to an independent producer, signed a contract to write a film for Eddie Murphy, and sold scripts to Steven Spielberg's TV series, **AMAZING STORIES™**. The busy producer-director was so pleased with Garris's scripts that he made him story editor of the series. 33-year-old Mick talked with writer Bill Warren in his office at Universal Studios, near the fabulous set of office suites the studio built to lure Spielberg into their lot.

**BW:** How much control does Steven Spielberg have over this show?

**MG:** Total control. He approves every director, helps choose them; every script goes through him, and he suggests changes and tweaking here and there. He is the man behind **AMAZING STORIES™** in every way. He

chooses people he believes in and lets them do their work. That's why they're there. This sounds like a puff piece on Steven Spielberg, but he is the best, and so far I don't have any reason to say anything but puffery about the guy, and I doubt that I will. Until he hates my next script.

**BW:** Why did he use the title **AMAZING STORIES™**?

**MG:** It's the perfect title for the show. It says what the show is about, and Steve has read probably every pulp story in existence; it appeals to him. But it's not called **STEVEN SPIELBERG'S AMAZING STORIES**. It's called just **AMAZING STORIES™**. He did take out an option on some of the stories from the magazine.

**BW:** It's primarily a coincidence that it's the name of an existing magazine?

**MG:** It may have been what inspired him in the first place, but as I've not had that discussion with Steven, it's difficult for me to answer that, though I've been asking about it. Basically, the title says everything there is to say about this series. There's a wide variety of storylines; the official term is "the bright side of the fairy tale." It takes life and makes one left step, taking it just a little twist out of real life and throwing things into the amazing world. Usually they are bright and up, entertainment-oriented. A couple are very dark, a couple are suspenseful, and there are a couple of genuinely scary ones. For instance, one that Martin Scorsese did

called "Mirror, Mirror" and another one called "The Amazing Falsworth" that Peter Hyams directed; I wrote that from Steven's story. Both of them are based on stories by Steven, but are really exceptions to the rule.

The whole point of having an anthology series is to have a totally different show every week, within a certain stylistic realm; it's always going to feel like *AMAZING STORIES*™, but different each time. Sometimes an out-and-out comedy, sometimes a suspense one, and sometimes pure Spielbergian fantasy. He's directed a couple of them himself so far.

**BW:** Our readers will wonder: here is this long-lived magazine called *Amazing® Stories*, yet not a single story that has been published in it is going to be included in the TV series called *AMAZING STORIES*™.

**MG:** At this point, Steven's stories and the originals that have been created in-house are more than enough; they suit exactly the kind of show he wants to make. They're contemporary in tone, and it's what appeals most to him. That's not saying that we will not ever turn to published stories, but at this point there's been such a creative explosion within this company that that's where all the ideas have come from thus far. The story department has been reading the magazine for a long time, though.

**BW:** Why are all these original stories?

**MG:** Because they happened; Steven was coming up with a story a week.

**BW:** Turned on the faucet and couldn't turn it off?

**MG:** Exactly. He's always had ideas that sometimes couldn't be developed as movies, but would make great little stories.

**BW:** You say this is going to be

light and upbeat. Are all the stories going to have happy endings?

**MG:** Not all of them, but many of them; sometimes there will be surprise endings, but usually not. It will be on Sunday nights at 8:00, followed by *ALFRED HITCHCOCK*.

**BW:** Why is this show only half an hour long?

**MG:** That was one of Spielberg's decisions; probably a lot of your readers would remember when *TWILIGHT ZONE* went from half an hour to an hour, or when *ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS* did the same thing. Almost all those hour episodes were just half-hour shows with padding. If you've got something that will hold up for an hour, and keeps you really moving, you've probably got something that would make a good movie. Half an hour's just right for a little idea; it's not enough for a movie, but it's more than a scene. It's a 23-minute movie, an idea that can be self-contained like that is a real kick in the pants.

**BW:** What about overseas markets?

**MG:** I've read that it's not being offered to the regular foreign networks for a long time yet, but there's going to be a theatrical feature released in Europe, probably three episodes directed by Steven. One of them he did is going to be an hour special, maybe to go in the sweeps week or something like that. It looks like they may bunch three of them together, including one I wrote, for European theatrical release. The show is going to have several lives; it's going to be released theatrically, it's going to go on pay TV.

**BW:** Why do you think that these fantasy shows are popping up again all of a sudden?

**MG:** Maybe it's because the executives at the networks are realizing that there's another way to bring talent into television, where people who would



never think of doing television would do a miniature movie. Science fiction and fantasy in the movies is an answer, because it's boxoffice.

**BW:** V went belly-up.

**MG:** That was TV science fiction; they were delivering something other than what people were going to see in the movies. I think that most science fiction on television has been disastrous because it's not made by people who make the science-fiction movies. It's made by people who are imitating — they think — the science-fiction movies, and they put them into a standard television formula.

**BW:** Are any of these episodes going to be — the verb today is novelized, but they're not novels.

**MG:** The merchandizing people assure me there will be at least one book; I'd love to do a couple of them myself. But they don't want the stories to appear before they run on the show.

**BW:** What if the show doesn't succeed?

**MG:** If the show doesn't succeed, it doesn't succeed. However, we are committed to two years to NBC, 22 shows a year. No one ever has gotten a deal like that.

**BW:** A lot of the production values of TV in general are about as good as movies, but not in the way the photography is done — lots of closeups, that sort of thing. Is the show going to look like a movie?

**MG:** I think if you were to walk onto a set for a general episodic TV show, or if you look closely at a TV show — which people don't, because you usually look at the people — you would see it looking like a set. It's really not the most convincing-looking stuff, but because of the way TV is made and shot and edited, you don't notice. The production values and everything on AMAZING STORIES™ are every bit as good as *E. T.* If

you tuned in in the middle of this show, didn't know it was a TV series, you would absolutely assume you were watching a movie.

You've got Peter Hyams directing the way he does, very artful lighting, lots of sinewy camera moves and all this stuff. Spielberg's footage you cannot tell from features that he's done. You know his style from the first shot, and style is not something you usually get from TV shows.

**BW:** It's both a return to what television used to apply to itself and to what you currently see in movies.

**MG:** Absolutely.

**BW:** Who are some of the other directors?

**MG:** The list of directors is unbelievable. In addition to Spielberg, Hyams and Scorsese, Clint Eastwood just did one, which I saw final cut on yesterday. It's really good, a romance that Steven scripted. A 23-minute movie directed by Clint Eastwood from a script by Steven Spielberg starring Harvey Keitel and Sondra Locke. Paul Bartel wrote and directed an original. I think they're trying to get Joe Dante, who wants to do one. David Cronenberg may well be doing one. Burt Reynolds is doing one. Bob Balaban, Irvin Kershner, they've each done episodes. So did Bob Clark, Matthew Robbins and William Dear. [Balaban is usually an actor; he was in *Close Encounters*, for instance, as well as *2010*. Matthew Robbins directed *Dragonslayer*, Kershner did *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Never Say Never Again*; William Dear did *Timerider*, Paul Bartel did *Eating Raoul*, Joe Dante directed *Gremlins* and *Explorers*, and David Cronenberg did *Scanners* and *The Dead Zone*. So Garriss is right in suggesting that some of the top directors in this field are working on the show. BW] The direc-

tors all get the same fee. No one is in it for the money. The writers get scale, the actors get a "favored nation" clause. They do it because they want to do the show, so no one's getting rich on this show except, eventually, the studio and production company.

**BW:** Some of them have fantasy credits; but Eastwood, Reynolds, and Scorsese seem like the odd men out.

**MG:** Not really, because it's an opportunity to do something not expected of them; to be able to shoot something in a week; rather than to commit a year of their lives to a film, to commit a month to making something they want to do, maybe not something they want to spend a long time doing.

**BW:** What about casts?

**MG:** "The Amazing Falsworth" is played by Gregory Hines; imagine, the first thing I've ever written to be produced by anyone but me, and Gregory Hines is reading my dialog. He and Richard Masur are in that; Robert Blossom and Lucas Haas are in Steven's first episode, "Ghost Train." Sid Caesar is in one; he's terrific. Milton Berle has a cameo in one. Douglas Seale, Kevin Kostner — not a lot of name actors. A handful.

**BW:** What about the writers? I notice that on *THE TWILIGHT ZONE*, they are using well-known fantasy writers to do the teleplays, including Richard Matheson, and Harlan Ellison is a consultant. Why are there none of these writers on *AMAZING STORIES*™?

**MG:** It's a different situation. We're dealing with original stories of Steven's, and he chooses to have screenwriters adapt them as opposed to literature writers, because either he wants to give the chance to people he thinks deserve it, or has specific people and types of writers to interpret his ideas. The writers on our show are a little less familiar. Steven himself has

written probably 80% of the stories; these are beginning, middle, and end, not just "Oh, I got an idea about a spacesuit that eats people," or something. (There is no story on *AMAZING STORIES*™ about a spacesuit that eats people.) Josh Brand and John Falsey [The supervising producers; the executive producers are Spielberg, Kathleen Kennedy, and Frank Marshall. BW] have written a handful of them, and a couple of original stories as well. I've written or co-written a half-dozen now, and just finished my first original, which I co-wrote with Tom McLoughlin. Gail and Kevin Parent have written three. Earl Pomerantz has written a couple of them; he's done lots of good television comedy. Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandell wrote one. Writers of film and television are less familiar anyway.

**BW:** *THE TWILIGHT ZONE* and *AMAZING STORIES*™ are going to be compared and contrasted the minute they're on the air.

**MG:** That's up to the audience. I'm sure it's going to happen, and there's no way to keep it from happening, but all I can say is we're making the best little movies we can make on a pretty elaborate budget (\$750,000 an episode). As far as I'm concerned, the best time in television history was the Fifties when there were a dozen anthology series on the air. I think the Eighties can stand four anthologies on network television: *THE GEORGE BURNS COMEDY HOUR*, *ALFRED HITCHCOCK*, *THE TWILIGHT ZONE* and *AMAZING STORIES*™.

**BW:** How did you get involved on *AMAZING STORIES*™?

**MG:** I had known Steven for about three years. When I first really met him, he was a guest on my talk show, and then I worked in publicity on *Poltergeist* and *E.T.* So he knew me as

an interviewer, and a publicist, and a kind of a buff. When I started to make my living as a writer, my agent submitted samples when I heard about AMAZING STORIES™. Steven never knew I was a writer; I kind of kept my mouth shut about that, and when there was a really positive report written on one of my scripts, he said, well, let's give Mick a chance. So I wrote one, and found out later it was the first episode written for the show. He was very happy with it, gave me another one right away, something totally different, a World War II story. I'm not a real expert on that kind of thing, I'd only seen one before in my life, but he was happy with that one too, and asked me if I would go on staff.

**BW:** Are you going to be on this for the duration of the show or what?

**MG:** I don't know. The studio has the option to renew my contract on a yearly basis. I'm under contract to Universal, but I can take any job Steven approves. So far, that's been a feature for Paramount with Eddie Murphy, but now who knows if that's going to be filmed. *Double Vision* was something I wrote last year on spec, just on my own, based on a short story I'd written. Mark Carliner optioned it, and this will be his next after he finishes producing Walter Hill's current film. I'm going to meet the director on that next week, but that was something I wrote before AMAZING STORIES™ came along. Now I've just turned in the second draft of this feature for Steven himself; as opposed to his currently-shooting production, *The Color Purple/Moonsong*, it is what you would think of as a Steven Spielberg film.

**BW:** So Spielberg wanted you to be

the story editor?

**MG:** I don't think he knew what a story editor on a TV series really was. I certainly didn't know, and I still don't know, because this is an exceptional production.

**BW:** So what do you do? You come in in the morning, you sit at the desk, . . .

**MG:** I write and I rewrite, and I outline.

**BW:** Your own stuff?

**MG:** No, no. Sometimes. Basically it's either writing scripts, outlining scripts from someone else's ideas, coming up with ideas, outlining my own ideas; most writers are entitled to two drafts — the free-lancers — and most of our scripts have been free-lance. Any writing that needs doing after the first two drafts becomes the story editor's job, so when a director is assigned, they'll often require changes. On other shows, story editors are also responsible for hiring the writers and guiding them and coming up with all the stories. It's a much more demanding job. On most shows, too, there's an outline of recurring characters, and a style that's got to be met, and the story editor guides it so that it meets these requirements. As an anthology, we don't have that. Even though I'm story editor, I have never met with any network people, I have never met with people in The Tower [Universal's executive building] on this. It's directly with the producers and Steven.

**BW:** You don't approach people for scripts?

**MG:** No.

**BW:** So nobody needs to write to this magazine in care of you.

**MG:** Right, right. Please.

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*As editors of this magazine, we will continue to read unsolicited, unagented literary material. However, we are not agents of, nor will we forward unpublished literary material to, nor will we even discuss unpublished literary material with Universal City Studios or with any production company associated with those studios or with the television series, Amazing™ Stories.*



**A VOICE IN EVERY WIND**  
by Don Sakers  
art: Bob Walters



*Don Sakers was born a US Navy brat in Japan during the International Geophysical Year. He now lives in suburban Baltimore, where he works for a very tolerant library system. Mr. Sakers likes math, history, science, and anything else that isn't vegetables or seafood. If he could be anyone in history besides himself, he would probably be Hephaistion.*

I have a copy of the Fifth Forbidden Book.

My friend Treyl was very anxious to see it; he did not realize that my people used books. So I led and Treyl followed with his strange ungainly waddle, away from the clevth and northward into the hills. This was in the time of the wet spring winds, when the rimmith bloom for their brief lives and the sun passes the Seam of Heaven in a shower of sparks. The clevth was upwind, and every gust brought the awareness of my people preparing for the time of breeding: young females ready to mate and drop their eggs in the shallows, half-year-olds anxious to pick up the beginnings of their coats, adolescents ready for a last taste of the ancestral waters before entering their final forms. The night was alive with sensation, alive in a way that made Treyl and the Fifth Forbidden Book so much more exciting.

With Treyl watching I carefully took the Book from its wrapping — cured membranes of the large jarief fish — and cradled it in my three forward hands. My copy of the Fifth Forbidden Book is a heavy thing, with leaves made from pressed plant-fibers and separated by more membranes. As I held it, my hands detected its ancient holiness, and I caught a wisp of the long-ago scribe who had lovingly transferred the words of the original Book to this copy. I opened the Book to its first leaf, raised it to my face and caressed it with my antennae. Just as he had deposited them so long ago, I felt the thoughts of Ep-Naph the Great Warrior, thoughts that he had left to be preserved by the brotherhood for those of his descendants who could comprehend them.

Treyl leaned forward, looking naked without a coat of star-shaped pled by their hundreds, looking ready to fall over as he balanced on an amazing two limbs while reaching for me with the only other two he possessed. When I first met Treyl I closed my mind against the onslaught of pain that had to emanate from one so crippled — only later I learned that his people are naturally malformed.

His backpack spoke: a combination of the soundless speech of my people, and the noisy chitters and clicks of the secret tongue of the brotherhood. "May I see it, Dleef?"

"It is old and fragile, my friend Treyl. Please take care as you would handling a newborn."

He left me holding the Book, removed an antenna from his backpack

and brushed it lightly over the surface of the leaf. "Amazing. That chemical traces could be so exact. That your sensory apparatus can pick them up. That they convey so much information."

"The Book is old," I told him, "and was but a copy to begin with. Many passages have faded and are hard to read."

"My backpack can read them all. Possibly it can duplicate the chemicals and make those passages easier to read. Would you like me to do that?"

I regarded him well, this odd small creature from nowhere. The rest of the clevth bore him the usual disregard for a stranger who does not smell right; why did I trust him? Was it that other thing, which made me a part of the brotherhood and brought me the enmity of my people? Whatever, I knew that I did trust Treyl, trusted him with something in me that went beyond his smell and his strangeness. "The clevth leaves with morning, and although I do not wish to go south right now, I shall accompany them. You may work your magics on the Book until daylight."

"Until daylight." He pressed one of his hands against mine, gently, to avoid hurting himself on my pled coat. And through the interstices and the living bodies of my pled seeped a measure of his alien feel, and once again I wondered about him.

About myself.

Treyl read, and the night deepened. The winds bore taste of my sleeping clevth, and of oh so much more: bands of hunting jrill on far-off plains, the scent of other clevths, and always the life-bearing fragrance of the sea.

The first of the great moons rose presently, its tiny half-disc swimming amid the glittery fish that live on the Seam of Heaven. Every night there is a gap in the Seam, a gap that slowly works its way from east to west — the brotherhood says it has been there since Ep-Naph died and shattered the world as it was. More is told of this in the Second Forbidden Book, which I have never seen.

Treyl says that the gap is the shadow of the world. The rest of my people do not think about it. Nor, most of the time, do I.

But there are times, times when a feeling comes that is at once different and familiar: when one looks at something one has known all her life, like the Gap or a rimmith blossom, like the summer winds or the tiny bodies and shells of one's own pled — and one begins to muse, to wonder.

It comes and it goes, this feeling, and even the brotherhood (the creator of speech) has no word for it. None is needed, for without the feeling there are no words; there is merely the language of the air and the land and the water, there is only the unknowing twitch of antennae, there is only snorting and growling and baying at the moons.

The night deepened, and in me that feeling ebbed.

The moon.

The taste of the clevth, and the far-off smell of hunting jril.

The night winds caressed me, and I knew their messages without knowing, dozed without knowing I slept, awakened without awareness of what it means to wake. Most of my people live always this way, never tasting for a moment the terror and the joy of that feeling which the brotherhood does not name.

Treyl read.

When morning came, the Seam of Heaven announced the sun's arrival half a limb early, becoming a red arch across half the sky. And the winds told me that the clevth was awake, awake and ready to set out for the sea. Gone was all trace of my resolve to remain, to go north — now I responded by turning for the clevth and the sea.

Treyl wrapped the Fifth Forbidden Book, reverently; and, without considering, I took it from his hands and tucked it under my pled coat in front, where the pled shells have grown and not anchored themselves to my thorax plate. I think Treyl's backpack spoke to me in the language of the brotherhood, but all I could hear was the voice of the winds, all I could do was answer them.

His backpack's long antenna touched me smelling of question, and I reassured him that all was right, that we were to join the clevth on its march south, that I knew of his presence and I approved.

That morning, with the sun mounting Heaven's Seam like a bead on a string, my clevth set out. Makers, farmers, herders; carriers, runners, shamans — all fell into their places, with their tools and their herds, with their burdens and rattles, with all the lesser beasts that accompany the clevth. And around them all, protecting, were the warriors. We are strong, and fast, and we have our own armor beneath our pled coats. And the greatest mystery of all, the brotherhood is made up only of warriors. The blood of Ep-Naph is ours, the heritage of Ep-Naph is ours, and if clevth exists at all it is because we defend it.

I stepped into my place, all about me the heady smells and tastes of the clevth on the move. Treyl walked hesitantly behind me, flanked by two young warriors who had only taken their forms last year.

That long march I spent much time pitying Treyl for his loneliness. At least when my spells struck I had Treyl to talk with, and I could hope to meet another of the brotherhood in my state, and I could dream that I would be normal once again. But Treyl had no normality, and he had no one to talk with but the voices from his backpack. So lonesome was the man, I imagined, that he believed those voices to come from the sky and to be talking to him alone. I felt then that they were nothing more than the random voices that one smells in the high cold winds atop the mountains, or in the currents of rivers that wash strange clevths.

For time and for time my clevth has moved south along the way, until



the very rocks bear the smell of our passage. We merely follow, knowing that we will reach the breeding grounds before the females reach heat, the babies dry out, and the adolescents grow so large as to burst their skins.

Three days upon the march we came faces-to-faces and antennae-to-antennae with another clevth. This was in the rocky lowlands near the great river that bears the city Cora like an overripe fruit. Here the winds were strong from the left, blowing from out of the east with the scent of the sea.

The dance began. In meeting of clevths, always the dance is the master.

The first movement belonged to us, the warriors. In the front lines we examined one another. The other clevth was mostly warriors; they had left all their other forms, but for a few runners and shamans, at home. And they reeked of hostility.

Next movement belonged to the shamans. They took the front rank, and now messages flew back and forth with every gust and every touch: You do not belong here. Get out of our way. Go further and we will kill you. We will wipe you out to pass. The air grew absolutely thick with threats and counter-threats. The animals in our clevth set up fierce noises in response, and all other awareness faded beneath the overwhelming odor of hate.

This is the way of the dance.

And now the third movement began, the shamans retiring in good order as we warriors advanced. One last threat charged the air as before a summer storm — and then it broke. Without knowing what I did, I leaped. Another warrior tried to seize me, I danced backward, and he advanced with spears in his hands.

At once my stomach turned, and I was in my strange state. I saw Treyl behind me, fumbling at his backpack, and I felt the pressure of the Fifth Forbidden Book against my thorax plate.

And I remembered. The Fifth Forbidden Book is made up of Ep-Naph's words and thoughts about battles and military matters, about things that are the concern of warriors.

The wind gusted strong from the east. And now that I could remember — now that I could plan for the future — I recalled what Ep-Naph said: the upwind army usually wins.

Is there any reason, I asked myself, that we should always remain slaves of the dance? That we cannot act on our own? The clevth would never follow me — but it would follow the scent of success.

Now to succeed.

"Treyl. Help me. Get my clevth upwind of the others. There is no use being gentle, or trying to explain — just push them." For such a strange being, Treyl was stronger than he looked. He could shove an adult with little trouble. "Leave the warriors alone. Get the clevth upwind, and they will adjust their fighting naturally."

I ducked a foreign warrior's spear-cast. Easy to talk of moving my army upwind, difficult to do. For once the dance is joined and the lust of battle is upon a warrior, she has little else to do but fight, and go on fighting, until all the enemy are gone and their smell eradicated from the battlefield.

— That is why it works, Ep-Naph!! How clever you are, ancestor of mine. When the enemy-smell from my clevth drifts down among the others, they will become confused and may even battle one another. And we will win, though we have only half the warriors.

"Listen to me, my clevth!" With the language of my people, the language that is without words, I called to them. "Follow me, and the others will fall." Kevva, one of the young new warriors, was next to me. I touched her with two hands and let them carry the message — that the others would fall if we could move upwind and confuse them.

As the revelation had struck within my own self, I saw Kevva's eyes twitch with the realization of it. And Kevva moved to the left, going on to touch others around her.

Great Ep-Naph, not only did I have the power to speak with the brotherhood, to realize what the words of Ep-Naph meant . . . but I had the power to make others see as well.

For a moment I could feel the dance altering, and it was almost as if I held the dance between my hands, the way a maker holds a lump of clay he is molding.

Treyl was doing admirably, by the simple process of carrying youngsters and letting their distress-calls bring their elders. And in no time Kevva and I had a band of converted warriors following us. The direction of the dance itself was changing. The wind mounted, and I waded into the fighting, surrendering to the power of the dance.

By the time the sun had moved another limb up in the sky, we had won. The other clevth retreated, and cast forth the smell of defeat that calmed us and made us unable to follow. We re-grouped, then continued south.

I sought out Treyl, my elation swirling away with eddies of wind and dripping onto the rocks. "Treyl, did you see what happened? Did you see? It worked. My plan worked."

"I'm proud of you, Dleef. Yes, it worked. How did you manage to convince the others to go along with you? Your people are not much for original ideas, you know."

"I do not understand. Can your magic antenna tell us?"

Treyl whipped out the antenna, ran it over my body. He snorted as we walked. "A lot of unidentified enzymes being produced by your body, my friend." He paused, took out another stiffer antenna, and stabbed it deeply into the body of one of the fallen warriors. The clevth marched on, ignoring him.

"Chance is going to have to analyze these data before he can come up

with a hypothesis." Chance is the name Treyl gives to what he believes to be a large being like himself far up in the sky beyond the Seam of Heaven. To me, this sounded awfully like the nonsense of the shamans, and I supposed Treyl to be a kind of shaman himself.

"Then, we will let him."

Treyl plunged his stiff antenna into many other bodies, then brushed the battlefield in several places with other antennae. By this time the clevth was many steps away, and the two of us had to move very quickly to catch up.

We marched, Treyl muttered to his sky-voices, and I wondered at my new power.

Sea.

It makes itself known a day's march away. The power of the sea draws a clevth the way sweetfruit pulls springflies. Our stretch of the sea is a sandy cove with gentle shallows which are strewn with reefs of pled. The sea smells and tastes like the naked blood that a warrior sheds for his clevth; it is soothing on the skin like nothing else.

Joy swept outward in crestless waves, as little ones and adults alike plunged into the surf. We warriors stood back, watching and ready to move, until the lazy taste of relaxation came to us off the seabreeze, and we knew the clevth was safe. Then we splashed into the water. Within my coat and touching my flesh, I could feel the tiny pled rejoicing to be among their own kind.

While breeding went on, I suddenly had one of my spells. Why should we have such ecstasy only when the sun felt like it? Why not take home some of these breeding waters in jars, and use them for the clevth? It was an idea that made me tremble, an idea that could almost have come from Treyl and his alienness.

Reminded, I looked for Treyl — found him sitting on the sand idly dragging his fingers to make patterns. Always it is hard to guess what Treyl is feeling, for the scents he gives off are odd and cryptic. Yet now I thought my friend was melancholy, and I reluctantly pulled myself from the water and crawled up the beach to sit next to him.

"Do your voices from the sky not speak with you?" I asked.

"They have nothing to say." He sighed, and my antennae twitched. Can it be that the scent of loneliness is the same for all people?

The sun was hot and dry, and all at once I thought that I must get into the water or I would parch right there. I left Treyl, and with the first gulp of breeding-water I forgot him, and spent the rest of my time wallowing with the others.

Days and days and days passed. Eggs stiffened and dried, until they could survive outside water. Younglings proudly showed off the marks where pled had attached to their skins. And then the breeding water took

on a sharp acrid taste, and we all watched the hatching of adolescents into their new forms.

Treyl counted for me — thirty-two adolescents had entered cocoons. As I drew back from the water, I had a spell, and was able to keep track of the forms that emerged. Eight warriors, seven farmers, six makers and six herders, three carriers, and two runners. Treyl cocked his head, then his backpack spoke, translating his sounds into words.

“Running just along planetary averages,” he said. I had the feeling he was talking to his sky-voices rather than to me. “Warriors are up twenty percent, while makers, farmers, and herders are down.”

He didn’t need to tell me this. The last few breeding cycles, the clevth has had more warriors than it needs. And not just our clevth, but every one we knew. The brotherhood says the problem includes even Metla and the Gelk lands.

“Why, Treyl? Why are more warriors being made?”

Treyl noticed me. “We’re not sure. Something has upset the chemical balance of your clevths. A new enzyme is stirring around, changing the distribution of forms. We haven’t been able to locate the center of its effect. At first it seemed to be Tar-Ve, then we followed the trail northward. Your clevth was a stop along the way.”

Dripping, the new adults scuttled onto sand and presented themselves before our three shamans. The shamans twitched and touched, flicked antennae over the new ones. And the odor of dissatisfaction grew. Finally, inspection complete, the shamans turned to the clevth. All of us were massed on the beach, over three hundred adults with all the assorted dependents of the clevth. All waiting for judgement.

Our shamans seem to have a ritual dance for every occasion, and this was no exception. They jumped and flapped their limbs, moving through the clevth and touching everyone they could. Others joined the dance, and as a shaman passed upwind I sniffed a reproduction of my own scent. The dance began to circle about me, and in my hearts I felt dread. Treyl stood next to me, but the rest of the clevth withdrew to weave a pattern of accusation.

Yes, accusation. I heard Treyl’s backpack whispering into his ears; I do not know how much of the display it understood. To me the meaning was clear. Too many warriors had formed, the shamans said. And I, Dleef the Mad, was held responsible. Shamans must blame something — for early snowfall that kills our crops, for awful sulphurous smells that waft in from the east and leave half the clevth disabled, for the formation of too many warriors at breeding time. . . .

Now the scent of warriors entered the dance, that attack-scent which sooner or later is always mixed with the smell of death.

My death.

“Am I reading this aright?” Treyl asked.

I signalled assent. "My clevth wishes me dead."

"Because of me?"

"Because of what I am. Because I know the language of the brotherhood. Because I know you. Because they think my presence is causing more warriors to form."

"It is."

For a second I took my eyes off the clevth's dance of death. "You too, Treyl?"

Before he could answer, the dance broke and the nearest warriors rushed me. At their head was Kevva, lunging with claws extended and reeking of more murderous hate than a whole pack of hunting jrill.

A warrior is strong and fast. Each of us spends much time each day sharpening natural ridges in our pled coats, so that our arms are like knives, our back ridges like scrapers, the tips of our feet like spear heads. Kevva came at me now, as the others came behind her, brandishing those natural weapons with deadly skill.

One does not deliberate, one does not think — when attacked, one defends, defends to the limit of her ability. Kevva met my own sharp forearms. Although I was braced with four legs, her impact was jarring, and I felt my pled protesting and digging further into my skin with all their might. Kevva pulled back, pled coat over her chest cracked.

I drew my spear and lunged. The fracture in her coat was weak and it broke — I thrust with all my might as Kevva's blood splashed over me and over the ground. Then Kevva fell, my spear buried deep in her chest. In the blood that had touched me — as well as in her eyes — I thought I read her too-late cry for forgiveness, and I knew that a member of the brotherhood had passed, her heritage unknown even to herself.

I had killed . . .

Had killed Kevva.

Treyl saved me, for as I stumbled back with Kevva's blood still flowing off my coat, he dropped into a crouch and brought up still another of his strange antennae. From this one darted a line of light like fire, and where it touched, warriors withdrew. Pain and burned flesh filled the air, and their scents echoed around the still-spinning dance. Injury, injury would feed the dance and feed the rage of the warriors.

"Treyl, we must go."

"Follow me, then." His fire-antenna opened a path through the dance, and I scuttled after Treyl as he ran. He held the clevth at bay, and as we raced away I bade last farewell to the familiar tastes and odors of my clevth.

Now Treyl was all I had.

North and east we walked, the sun each morning red and bright to the left of the Seam of Heaven. We walked through wetlands alive with the

traces of a million different creatures. I do not know how many days it took us to reach the city Cora; I was in no state to count, and those days passed one after another before me as images in dreams. Sun, trail of different beasts, wet dark soil beneath my feet — these were all I knew until we drew close enough to see and smell Cora.

Cora. Mounds, huts, maker-built edifices that towered three and four times the height of a person. The river flowed through Cora, spanned by stone and wood bridges. On the river were the square sails of great ships, the ships that sailed from Tar-Ve outward . . . all over the Kaan Empire and beyond, to Metla, to the Gelk lands, to the coasts of the dumb savages who traded hardwoods and odd-tasting spices for the products of our makers.

Treyl touched my chest. “Ep-Naph made the first ships, didn’t he?”

“So the stories say. The brotherhood tells that the shipwrights of Tar-Ve follow instructions from the Fourth Forbidden Book every time they build.” Tar-Ve, last home of Ep-Naph, is said to possess copies of all five Forbidden Books. “Only those of the brotherhood can sail the ships.”

“He must have been an amazing person, Ep-Naph.”

“The brotherhood reveres his memory. He was something special, Treyl. Something that will not come again.”

Cora. Scents of cooking, of domesticated herds, of people living close with one another. Cries of happy children, bleating of animals. And the tang, the aroma of the brotherhood . . .

Without even being aware of the change, I had slipped into one of my spells. I turned to Treyl. “Why did you agree with the shamans of my clevth?”

He placed his hands on his hips. “Welcome back, Dleef.”

I emanated puzzlement. “I have not been away. Why did you agree with the shamans?”

“I guess you haven’t. Let me tell you, when we are in the city and have a place to rest. Antigravs or not, this backpack is heavy.”

“We are not of Cora. Cora’s warriors will not allow us into the city unless we are under the protection of a Coran.” The city is vast, and its people of a hundred or so related clevths — none of them mine. I could find a member of the brotherhood to give sponsorship, yet that would take time.

Treyl laughed. “My backpack can take care of that.” He twitched his fingers against his opposite arm, and around us grew the smell of the Cora clevths. My antennae tightened as they always do at the scent of strangers; so far, it was a friendly smell.

“Treyl, you amaze me.” Then I had a thought, one that even Ep-Naph had not put into the Fifth Forbidden Book. Treyl’s backpack was magical, and we could not duplicate it. Yet suppose some warriors could make

themselves smell like Corans — by wearing cloaks worn by city-dwellers, or some other method that a maker might know? Why, those warriors would be able to walk right into Cora, would be able to start a war before the Corans knew what was going on.

We entered the city, and after the proper exchange of courtesies a shaman gave us the use of a room and enough food to fill us both. As usual when he ate, Treyll put his food into the backpack and sucked the mush that emerged through a tube like a youngling feeding from its parent's mouth. He swallowed some small pebbles that his pack gave him, and then I repeated my earlier question.

"You *do* cause more warriors to be formed in your clevth, Dleef. You and all the others like you. There are nearly four million worldwide."

"Others like me? You mean the brotherhood?"

"Yes. The brotherhood consists of modified warrior forms. Each of you secretes . . . oh, this is complicated to explain. Each of you has a particular smell which causes more adolescents to form into warrior-mods like yourselves. So the brotherhood propagates itself from among the pool of its descendants." He shook his tiny head. "We simply can't locate the center of the vector. Where the change started to begin with."

"Ep-Naph was the first of us all."

"I know. We thought that might be the answer. But the center is definitely not in Tar-Ve. It started somewhere north of here, even farther than the homelands of your clevth, if Chance is right."

"I have never read the Second Forbidden Book, which tells of the life of Ep-Naph. Yet anyone of the brotherhood knows that he lived far north, in the mountains that encircle the desert of Raen. Only near the end of his life did he go to Tar-Ve. Many of his children remained in the north."

"That might be the answer. I'll have Chance run simulations."

For a time I pondered, while Treyll talked to his voices in the sky. After a long time he was done, and I was free to ask more questions. "Treyll, how am I different from my fellows? Can your backpack tell me that?"

"It's a difficult problem. You have more of a capacity to reason than do your fellows."

"Capacity to do what?"

"Reason. What you're doing now. The spells you have."

"I know that about myself. But why do I have the spells?"

"All of your people can reason. In times of great stress they produce a substance we call cogitin, which allows them flashes of rationality."

"I have never —"

My words hung in the air as he went on. "Of course not. Cogitin is a fragile molecule. It doesn't survive long inside the body, and even less outside. And your brains ordinarily need such a large concentration. But I've found that you warrior-mods produce a second substance, cogitigen,

that causes even higher levels of cogitin production.”

I had the vision of my blood seething like the breeding waters, with various smells and tastes being mixed in from all directions. Bodies, the breeding waters, the seas and the winds of the world . . . all are alike.

“I think I understand, Treyl.” We talked more, and then Treyl slept and I mulled over the things he’d said. The shamans were wrong, then, to force me to leave the clevth. The new warriors, and those younger than me . . . many were warrior-mods, many were brotherhood. Nothing the shamans could do would stop them from growing, from making others form.

And when they formed? And when there were more of us than of others? Already the sons and daughters of Ep-Naph had wrought things no makers could: the ships, the books, Tar-Ve and the Empire, the associations of clevths in Gelk and Metlan lands. What would come about when there were even more of us?

The flavor of the world was changing, every wind and every current whispered that change. When would the whisper become a roar, a shout, a drowning crescendo?

That night I left Treyl and stood on the flat baked-mud roof, beneath the stars and the Seam of Heaven, and I listened to the winds. An odd breeze was blowing out of the north, bringing with it all manner of smells from upriver. Pungent jريل, sweet grass and blossoming flowers, distant strange clevths — all sent notice of their presence free on a nightwind destined for the sea.

Yet there was something else. Something like, yet unlike, the scent of the brotherhood, a smell that had called to me when I was with my clevth even before Treyl. It was a compulsion I had ignored — to go to breeding with the clevth. But tonight, lone beneath the stars with the northwind’s song, I was free to answer.

The next morning I told Treyl we were going north.

“I’m not surprised. You’re attuned to something, Dleef, something so subtle that we can’t detect or track it. If you say we go north — then north we go.”

The shaman in Cora gave us mounts: surefooted, humpbacked daret. I had to laugh at Treyl, perched unsteadily on his, as we set off along the river’s west bank.

Conversation is not possible on the back of a galloping daret — the wind whips away both words and scents as soon as they are formed. We rode, and the sun moved behind us, crawling up the Seam of Heaven until our shadows pooled below us on sandy riverbank. Treyl’s backpack murmured to him a little past noon, and he signalled a halt.

“Follow me.” He galloped off into the high grasses and I spurred my daret to follow. In very little time we reached a mound overgrown with spring grass; next to it was a backpack just like Treyl’s and a large, flat



stone, fire-scored with a simple wheel design and some wavy lines. Treyl halted his daret and dismounted.

I did not need the overwhelming odor to tell me that this was the last sleeping place of one of Treyl's people.

"You didn't know Darga, did you?"

"She was killed before you arrived at my clevth. Darga was precious to you, Treyl?"

"She was my teacher. She got me this assignment. What a break! Solve the mystery of Kaa, planet of the sentient lobsters. How that would look on my record. But she didn't count on the jrill. I don't think she . . . she realized how much she was needed." I didn't have to smell sadness to know that Treyl missed his teacher.

I put a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry." This language is so inadequate when it expresses sorrow, compassion, sympathy. What, I wondered, do Treyl's people do? How do they avoid bursting with all the feelings that are locked within?

Treyl knelt by the backpack, touched it with an antenna from his own pack. For a long time he talked back and forth with his sky-voices, and I watched springflies twisting in their intricate dances above the grasses. Every once in a while, one could almost understand the springflies, the happywings, the other insects that filled the sky. Sometimes they were easier to understand than my friend Treyl.

"There are traces of unidentified enzymes here," he reported, "including, thirteen days ago, something that looks like cogitigen, but has a different fine structure. And strong cogitigen traces from the same period. Some of your brotherhood were here, Dleef."

An antenna-twitch warned me, and I spun to face three jrill only four daret-lengths away. "Treyl!"

There is what Treyl calls reason, caused by his funny substances swimming in the blood. And there is the state of most of my people, the waking dreamtime when one joins in the dance of the world like a skittering springfly. And both of these are good. Even Ep-Naph, who was the first of us to feel what Treyl names "thought", even Ep-Naph said that the brotherhood is not all. And the Fifth Forbidden Book nowhere mentions any improvement on the traditional methods of fighting jrill.

I remained conscious all through the fight, remained able to marvel at the way my limbs moved of their own volition, tracing paths of hate-smell in the air; at the way I pulled back from the slavering mouths, the ill-tasting claws dripping their fragrant poison. One of the darets took injury, and that saved Treyl and me — for by the time the third jrill turned away from my mount, I had killed one of its fellows and was dealing with the second. Treyl's gun ended the fight.

Breathing heavily, I stood over the dead jrill and felt hate and battle-

lust wafting away on the light breeze. Treyl waved his antennae. "That other enzyme is in the air. The one that looks like cogitigen."

"It . . . comes from the . . . jrill, then?" Treyl is a strange person, able to think of his funny little smells right after a death-battle.

"From the jrill, possibly. Or from you. Maybe it's just a variant of cogitigen. Damn it, this planet is a soup, and we still haven't been able to analyze which of a million different characteristics gives it its flavor."

I scanned the horizon, looking for more jrill, almost hoping more would show up. There is a feeling of elation after a battle, and being rational made it even more intoxicating. Let whole packs of jrill come . . . I, Dleef, would slay them.

"Worry about it on the way, Treyl. We are riding north. Let us ride."

We forded the river at a shallow spot only a day's ride from the lands of my clevth. There was another crossing further upstream — one that my people ordinarily used. I elected to ford here, because the brotherhood had a few members in the local clevth.

My people are enough related to these river-dwellers that our smells are compatible; they let me into their village and Treyl came behind me, his backpack mimicking my odor.

Mud huts, a few timber buildings, wooden pens for the herds. The village was enough like my own to make me feel a little wistful. Then, I caught a whiff of the scent I was looking for: the brotherhood.

A single person crouched in the doorway of the house that smelled like the brotherhood. Three eggs were cemented to her pled coat, each one hard and ripe and looking ready to hatch in only a greater moon or two.

"I am Dleef of the brotherhood, sister," I said to her in the speech of our kind. Her eyes fastened on me, dull and unseeing, and she drifted back to contemplation of the packed-earth floor.

"I am Dleef." I leaned forward, touched her with three arms, let her taste the exudates of my flesh. Would she not hear? Even here in the brotherhood's place, was I to be denied company? How could I be the only one who felt these spells?

Treyl waved one of his antennae between us, touched me in various places with another. "That mystery enzyme is turning up, Dleef. You're producing it." He frowned, and his sky-voices chattered at him loudly. "Her cogitigen production is going up. Ye gods, the two of you are heterodyning. Chance, are you getting all of this?"

The sister now looked at me again, and I knew she saw me. I sensed her quiet happiness, sensed the fact that she was aware. "I am Wreip," she said, "Of the brotherhood. Welcome to house and clevth, Dleef."

More than that flowed between us, oh so much more that even Treyl's backpack could not read. Wreip learned how I had befriended this strange being who talked to voices from the sky. I learned that she was joyful with the prospect of her young hatching at last, that she had made

pictures in the stars with one of the brotherhood some nights ago, that the river was running muddier than usual this time of year, that a ship from Tar-Ve had called a greater moon back and had brought some handsome fabrics. None of this was related in the language of the brotherhood, it all passed between us in the waves of wind and breath.

How must Treyl suffer, when he meets one of his people. How he must feel like bursting with all the news that he cannot relay.

Wreip led me to the river, bade me drink. I dipped my mouth into it, and the river spoke to me with myriad voices, each different and each with meaning of its own. Strong behind them all, though, was the trace that I had followed from the south. I identified it for Wreip while Treyl dipped his antennae into the river.

Wreip signalled negatives. "I do not sense it. Yet if you have followed it this far . . ."

". . . It comes from the north, from the slopes washed by this river." Our meanings blended and we let them go downcurrent.

Treyl shook his head. "Too many strange things to identify. I think you're tracking a cluster of enzymes, and without knowing the general configuration, we'll never be able to pick it out from background noise."

"It is here." *It is.* "And I must follow it to its source." I took out my copy of the Fifth Forbidden Book, opened its pages reverently, ran my antennae over them. "It is *his*, Wreip, it comes from Ep-Naph. I am sure."

Treyl spread his arms. "Some of the clusters are bound to look the same. You're in charge here, Dleef."

Wreip smelled of puzzlement. "Come back to the hut with me." There, she opened a wood cabinet and produced a book. "This is a copy of the Second Forbidden Book. It tells of the life of Ep-Naph." She turned to the very last page of the book. "Here the scribe has written that Ep-Naph's body was taken by his children, loaded onto one of the marvelous ships of Tar-Ve, and taken to his homeland at the edge of the Desert of Raen. Then his clevth buried the body with due ceremony presided over by the shamans, and there it lies to this day." She pointed upriver. "This river washes the slopes of the Raen Mountains, where Ep-Naph lived. Beyond is the desert and his tomb. Go there if you wish answers about Ep-Naph."

In the air and on her skin was a trace of something she left unsaid. Others had taken this way, seeking the tomb of Ep-Naph, following a trail no one else could read. What had become of them, she did not know. None had ever returned.

One, just recently gone, was the father who bore the three companion eggs to those she carried.

"I'm sorry, Wreip." I gave her my sorrow with more than voice, gave it her with all that was within me, until the air within the hut wept and I

knew the furnishings would reek of it for days.

"No sorrow." The acrid odor of pain and denial filled the room. Leave me alone, it said in a voice more poignant than language, go away and let me be. How dare, how dare, how dare you to make me remember! Let me, let me be.

"She'll remain conscious and rational as long as you're here," Treyl told me. "I think this mystery enzyme triggers cogitigen production."

"Then we will leave her. And we will seek Ep-Naph's tomb. And I shall return, Wreip."

On our one remaining daret, we rode due north toward Raen.

By the time sunset came I had forgotten, and my spell was over. With dreams no more real than those of our daret before me, I clung to the galloping beast and remembered nothing.

Rationality came back under the lesser moon and the Seam of Heaven.

"Treyl?"

"Mmm?" We were camped by the river. I lifted my antennae to the wind and realized we were farther north than the lands of my clevth. We had come nearly two days' ride, then.

"Tell me about the mystery enzyme. Tell me how I was able to bring sorrow to Wreip."

"We call it procogitin. All you warrior-mods have the glands to produce it, but you're the first one we've run into who can actually make the stuff."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do we. Our biochemists are working on the problem but they don't promise a solution. Basically, this is the way Chance thinks it happened: Ep-Naph was the first warrior-mod able to make procogitin. He stimulated all those around him to produce cogitigen, which then made cogitin. And a fair number of your people became rational for long periods, in the same sort of chemical heterodyning that we've witnessed between you and Wreip, between you and Kevva."

"Treyl . . ."

"Sorry. When Ep-Naph died, his procogitin was removed from the scene and your society had to rely on occasional flashes of rationality that warrior-mods have in greater duration than others. That was the brotherhood."

"And?"

"And every once in a while came another Ep-Naph — one who could produce procogitin. If one like that came up in a clevth like yours, then the effects were purely local and were damped by time and distance. If one appeared in Tar-Ve, or Metla, or Gelk . . . well, Chance thinks they are responsible for the spurts of development in your culture."

"You're saying that I am another of these? I'm like Ep-Naph?"

"You're something even more special. You're attuned so well to the chemical balance of your environment that you have read traces of Ep-Naph himself, and you are being drawn to his tomb. This extra sensitivity is a mutation that Chance and other agents have traced to the extreme northwest of this continent. In you, the two mutations came together. And with every kilometer you progress toward Ep-Naph's tomb, your procogitin production increases."

"Others have come this way?"

"A few. Procogitin is a much more durable molecule than cogitin or cogitigen. It stays in the environment indefinitely. Others have been this way . . . and you're probably following their tracks as well."

"Where does it lead?"

"We don't know. We can't possibly read all the nuances of the chemical states. You're going to have to tell us when we get there."

"It is rumored," I said, "that Ep-Naph wrote a Sixth Forbidden Book. I have heard that this book tells that one day Ep-Naph will return and a new sun of happiness will rise over his people, and all Kaa will become one splendid people. You're saying that Ep-Naph has come back, and that I am he?"

"Don't get delusions of grandeur. We don't know what is going on. Just that more warrior-mods are being born, that your population is expanding, and that strange new changes are coming to your people."

The moon's light was cold and tasteless. "Let's ride, Treyl. I want this over."

"So do I."

North. The river became a stream, then a trickle, then finally a chilly spring as the land rose higher and the air grew colder. And the trace I followed was stronger.

Treyl helped me up the mountains, especially after the daret broke its leg and had to be killed. Here in the heights, where grasses and trees and flowers gave way to mosses and bare rock, Treyl was invaluable. His backpack supplied us both with water, and with food — strange-tasting yet filling.

We passed a body, and I crouched to examine it.

. . . Wreip's cleventh-mate.

He still smelled faintly of her, smelled of the lowlands and the river. And he smelled of something else, something that made me want to rush ahead and find Ep-Naph's tomb, something that danced around the edges of my antennae and gave me a mad desire to scream until my voice shook the stars.

Treyl offered me a hand.

Dream.

Madness.

Waves of fear washed over me like the breeding waters — fear of Treyl, of the night, of the body that lay before me. I backed away from Treyl and tumbled onto the rock, hurting one of my legs.

Pain.

Fear.

Hate.

In the summer the air is sometimes so thick that it is hard to breathe, and one can choke on the leftover emotions of days passed. So I felt now, felt trapped and suffocated by fears and agonies that swirled around me.

Two ghostly images that looked like Treyl appeared next to him, and he conversed with them. I looked from one to the other, feeling awful smells and terrible growls brewing in my vitals. They had no scent, no taste; they were merely phantoms of light.

Like Treyl?

All at once the attack was over, and I moved from a packet of foul air that was swept clean by mountain breeze.

Treyl indicated the two ghosts. "Dleef, I have the honor to present Lady Alma deVigny and the cyborg Kwofi, both of the Kaa Cartel which protects your world."

His backpack translated their words, which were not meant for me. "Agent Treyl, we may be able to protect this world no longer. The Empire is putting pressure on us. Terran Defense is convinced that the increasing militancy of the dominant culture may prove dangerous to the Empire."

"Ridiculous."

"We know that. Terrad does not. They do not like mysteries, Treyl. Find a solution to this one before the Imperial Navy decides to set down ships and start their own investigations."

"You can't let that happen."

I crept closer, touched Treyl. "I am myself, Treyl. Let me lead you to Ep-Naph's tomb, and maybe we will find answers there."

"Did you catch that?" Treyl asked his ghosts.

"We did. Would a flier speed things?"

"We have to be on the ground, Lady, to read the traces and find our way. We will go as fast as we can, however."

"And we wait on two creatures scrambling over mountainsides. I do not like this. Do what you can." The ghosts disappeared, and Treyl laughed.

"Well, Dleef, I guess you're thinking that you've started to see my sky-voices yourself."

"I thought so at first. They are others like you, sending their images like . . . like the scents in the Forbidden Books, like the trace of myself that I send downriver whenever I cross the water."

"Astute, friend. Are you ready to continue?"

"Over the mountains and into the desert, Treyl. Follow me."

The Desert of Raen is a dreadful place of heat and dryness. Awful little creatures live there, six- and eight-legged beasts that scuttle in the shade of bizarre plants, waiting to strike with poisoned limbs. Treyl and I passed a few bodies, with nothing left by now but bleached pled coats picked clean of all flesh. They may have fallen to poison, to thirst, to the winds that spring up without warning . . . what mattered now was that they had fallen.

"No trace of any enzymes here," Treyl muttered, passing his antennae over a body.

I blinked, blinked again in sun that seared my eyes. "No, Treyl. The traces are here. We draw ever closer. Those hills in the distance, sculpted by the wind — we must go there."

Treyl shrugged. Water yield from his backpack was less than before . . . he told me that the air was drier, so the pack could not produce as much moisture. But the hills were only a day's walk away; we could make it easily, I thought.

Midday, and the sun sat high next to the Seam of Heaven. The Seam itself was like the glint of sun off sea, and it teased us with bright flashes in the corner of the eye.

"Dleef, I have to rest." Treyl threw off his pack and settled to the sand. I cast another look at the hills, felt wistful, and crouched beside him.

Sun . . .

I tumbled into dreams, clawing and grasping to stay where I was but losing my battle. Not enough procogitin, Treyl would perhaps say. I could not maintain what he called rationality. I think that the desert is too much, and after a few moments I regarded the dreams a blessing.

I was beside the river again, walking through grasslands and watching springflies dance. Then, I was next to the grave of Treyl's friend. I plunged my limbs deep into the rich, wet earth, tasted all the life that pulsed within. Life from death, as it has been and ever will be. . . .

The mound shifted, and an arm reached up. Not a flimsy five-fingered arm like Treyl's, but a fine, slender arm coated in the star-shaped shells of pled — an arm that belonged to one of my folk.

I stepped back, and the earth opened. Forth stepped Kevva, bleeding from horrible wounds that I knew I had inflicted, half her thorax-plate hanging loose and the inner organs bulging out. She reached for me with dirt-caked hands and antennae that twitched aimlessly. She smelled like Kevva, but she smelled also like something else, like death, like decay, like . . . like the path I was following to Ep-Naph's grave.

I stumbled back, cried out, and found myself back in the desert next to Treyl.

Treyl . . .

Under a compulsion not my own, as if I were nothing but a simple warrior under the command of an excited shaman, I lunged at Treyl, tasting hate in my mouth and on my hands.

Treyl raised his weapon, and a line of fire-light touched the smallest of my limbs, burned off a section of my pled coat and barely nipped the end of the leg. I howled, and my pain filled the still desert, dripped to sink into the sand, summoned the high-flying birds who wait for death before they feed.

And dreams passed.

"I'm sorry I had to shoot, Dleef. I knew stress would trigger your cogitin production."

"I hear you, Treyl." Hate, pain, anger — still I smelled all these things. "Treyl, I wonder if you are doing me a service, or causing me harm. Let it pass. We have come here to find Ep-Naph's tomb. Let us rest, and then we will do that thing."

The sun was in the final two limbs of heaven before we left, and it was touching the horizon when we reached the hills. A few more plants grew here, and the trace I tracked was so strong that I ached with it. "This way, Treyl."

A cairn of rocks, three times the height of a person, marked where Ep-Naph was buried. Some scent with meaning still clung to them: "Here lies the body of Ep-Naph. Cursed be any who disturb it."

But there were other messages, stronger messages, things I could smell that Treyl could not detect. This had brought me from the coast, and this would lead me to the next step. I ran my antennae over the rocks, and finally scrambled up the pile to one that reeked of the trace.

"Here, Treyl. This is where the message was left." I moved the rock, and all at once there were smells and tastes swimming around me. Under the rock was a tiny book, wrapped in skin and carefully anchored. I touched my antennae to its brittle pages.

As if Ep-Naph were standing beside me, I felt his presence, sensed his message in the way that all people talked, in the way that the Forbidden Books are recorded.

"To the one who has come, greetings. You will fulfill my life. You will bring happiness to our people. You will be the messenger of Ep-Naph."

"Are you getting this, Treyl?"

"Yes." He crouched next to me, his headgear thrown back, touching the book with his pack's antenna.

I read on. "I leave behind what I have wrought at Tar-Ve. I leave behind the brotherhood, may it last. I leave behind a hope. But you, you who stand here right now, you must finish my work. There are too few of us now. Many suns after I am dead, when my descendants range all over Kaa, then my legacy can be left."

Now a different presence hovered near me, like Treyl's ghosts, like a



true memory, bringing words from the past. "I am Rath of the brotherhood: scribe, and daughter to Ep-Naph. Let the one who has come pull loose the stone above this book's resting place."

I touched the indicated stone, put two hands around it, pulled. It did not move. My puzzlement flowed down the cairn; then Treyl laid his hands next to mine. "Now," he said, and again I put forth effort.

The stone pulled free — and all around it, like a bird carcass cooking long in hot water, the cairn dissolved. Rocks fell one way and another, dust rose in the stifling night. When all the movement was over, I stood with Treyl on a flat-topped rise. Twenty steps before us, desiccated and withered, brown from centuries of dirt, lay a body.

Ep-Naph.

I was drawn forward without thought, without dream, without volition or deliberation. I breathed deep, waved my antennae hungrily, ran my hands over the rocks, over the shroud of crumbly leaves, over the body.

No dream this time, images frozen since his death flowed through me. I am Ep-Naph, master of Tar-Ve, warrior of warriors, uniter of the clevths, creator of speech, he who tamed the waters. What Ep-Naph lived, I lived now; what he had breathed, I again tasted; whom he had known, I remembered. First wondering sight of the sun against the Seam of Heaven. The breeding waters of Lake Dren, where he had taken the first painful seeds of his pled coat, and later had emerged from the shell of those tiny animals as warrior — no longer adolescent. A kill, and kills, as warriors of other clevths fell before his hands, his weapons; his plans carried out by others of his clevth. The first ships, fashioned out of tree trunks by disbelieving makers. His children. Long days of work and war that resulted in Tar-Ve, wonder of ages to come.

I had known Ep-Naph before through his words in the Fifth Forbidden Book; now I knew him through his thoughts, through his life's remembered events, through his passionate love for his people and his desire for their advancement.

The stormflood of memories abated, and I was able to do nothing but quiver weakly and gasp for breath. Then a strange calm came over me; I felt strength welling inside me like clear cold water bubbling from a spring. I faced Treyl, who was sampling the area for his backpack.

"An incredible concentration of procogitin," he said, nearly to himself. "And your system is heterodyning with his, manufacturing more. . ."

"I am the one he awaited." In my mind there was a curious echo. Ep-Naph had spoken in the same way to his sons and daughters, high in a tower in Tar-Ve, the night he died. "His people — my people — are more now, and his descendants are spread among them. We wait, like the pled wait in the breeding waters until an adolescent comes by. My people and their world are that adolescent. And his body is the astringent taste in the water that triggers form change. When my world emerges from its

cocoon, all will be different.”

The legacy of Ep-Naph. Through his eyes I saw starved younglings — and tasted through his antennae their delight when Tar-Ve’s ships arrived laden with food. This was the legacy of Ep-Naph. And I — with Treyl’s help — would bring it to the world.

Treyl sank a probe into Ep-Naph’s body. “Enough procogitin here to bring rationality to all the brotherhood in Tar-Ve, in Metla and Gelk, and still have some left over. And you’re producing it like mad.”

I lifted my head, feeling the dry wind that would bring change to the world. Years, lifetimes would pass before this wind touched all the lands of my people — but the wind was born, and its birthcry heralded a new birth for my people.

“I will never be like the others, now. I will never have the dreamtime. Rationality is with me to stay, Treyl. And so it will be for others who see Ep-Naph.”

Stars in heaven shone through the Gap. “Come, Treyl. We will take Ep-Naph with us to Tar-Ve.”

A year later, the sun passes the Seam of Heaven in a shower of sparks while I watch from a tower in Tar-Ve. Below, in harbor, awaits the ship that will take me to the ancestral cove for breeding time. Some warriors from my clevth will ride with me this trip, even though Eylath and Treh-Nil begrudge time away from their math classes. The clevth should be together at breeding time.

Treyl cannot be here . . . but through the magic box he sends his ghost from far-off Terra, his homeworld. Almost I can smell the alien odor of my friend. Almost.

“I’m glad I caught you in, Dleef.” Treyl has been gone for half a year, dealing with his people on behalf of mine. Danger has passed now: Treyl’s people believe they understand mine, and they do not seem to fear what they understand. “I just want to wish you luck and happiness at breeding.”

“I am sorry you will not be there.” I miss Treyl, but in his absence he has arranged good things for my people: already technical books are being translated, and some of the brotherhood are experimenting in the southern ranges with metals. “My young will hatch in half a year; will you be back by then?”


“I’ll be sure of it.” There is nothing more to say in the curious limited language of speech. Although air currents in this tiny room carry all the unsaid messages I have for him, Treyl’s ghost cannot read them. We exchange ritual farewells, and then the ghost vanishes.

Soon, with the tide, the ship will sail. After breeding time it will carry me back to Tar-Ve; and over years to come I will range far over the world, I and my clevth-mates, my fellows in the brotherhood, my friends from

many clevths. We will further work the changes that alter the taste of the world.

Ep-Naph remains the mover of that change, in his dead body still smelling of procogitin in the center of the city . . . and in his living presence within me and within all who touched him, felt his memories, tasted his passions. Ep-Naph is the mover, and all of us — Trey! and his people as well — are Ep-Naph's living agents.

Soon the tide will turn. Look on the world and wonder, question, seek understanding. This is the legacy of Ep-Naph; this is the future of our people. Be happy.

So ends the Book of Dleef, which is also the Seventh Book, no longer Forbidden, of Ep-Naph. 

## CARTOON



William Rotsler

## CARTOON

ACCORDING TO THE  
INSTRUCTIONS, THAT  
IS A PRETTY GIRL!



Alexis Gilliland

## THE LONG-LOST FIRST DRAFT OF EDGAR ALLAN POE'S "THE RAVEN"

Once upon a midnight dreary  
While I pondered, bleak and bleary,  
Contemplating *hara-kiri* —  
Seeking Death's eternal shore —  
All at once, my grim surrounding  
Rang with echoes most astounding:  
Sounding just like some-one pounding,  
Hounding me outside my door.  
(Bill collectors. Nothing more.)

Then there came a crash of thunder  
As my door-frame smashed asunder  
And I gaped in helpless wonder  
As a shape began to loom;  
Through the entrance to my study  
Came somebody damp and muddy  
Dripping cruddy window-putty  
All across the ruddy room.  
(Traveling salesman, I assume.)

Then I felt my senses cave in  
When I saw this was a *Raven*  
That had entered, seeking haven  
From the storm beyond my door.  
Searching out a place for perching,  
Thus it entered, wildly lurching,  
Both its filthy feet besmirching  
Mud across my chamber floor.  
(Which I'd swept the day before.)

Thus provok'd, I fell to raging,  
And I contemplated waging  
Wrath and ire beyond assuaging  
On this bird. (Revenge is sweet.)  
"Fiend!" I shrieked, in rage aortal.  
"Raven, are ye ghoul or mortal?  
Look: you've muddied up my portal;  
Don't you ever *wipe your feet*?  
Answer, or you'll fill a coffin!"

Quoth the Raven:  
"Not too often."

— F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre

## SOCIAL LAPSES

A slime-beast from Fomalhaut Five,  
quite drunk in an old spaceport dive,  
proposed to nine men,  
six cats and a hen,  
and barstools, at least twenty-five.

— Darrell Schweitzer

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**INDIGO SHADE, ALIZARIN LIGHT**  
by William F. Wu  
art: Douglas Chaffee

*Bill Wu would have us know that he is not the opera singer William Wu (who lacks a middle initial). His "Wong's Lost & Found Emporium" in our May 1983 issue was a Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Award nominee.*

*Meanwhile, Dr. William Franking Wu (Ph.D., American Studies, University of Michigan, 1979) has published The Yellow Peril, a study of the ways Chinese Americans have been stereotyped in popular American fiction.*



And now I am come with this lost love of mine  
To lead but one measure, drink one cup of wine.

Sir Walter Scott, "Lochinvar"

Ted Chun spied a little boarded-up gas station next to the winding two-lane blacktop just ahead, and hit the brakes. Pounding music screamed from his four stereo speakers, as his white Camaro hatchback slowed suddenly. When he swung off the highway onto what used to be the drive of the gas station, he sent a pale cloud of gray dust up into the silent summer afternoon. The drive had never been paved, and now even the gravel was mostly scattered or buried.

Ted glanced into the rearview mirror. Behind him, most of the little Missouri town — the sign had read **BOSWORTH** — sat motionless in the heat. It showed little evidence of life. Everyone was working, probably out in the surrounding fields of corn, soybeans, or whatever else they grew around here.

With a sigh, he slammed the gearshift into park but left the engine running. He hesitated to leave the air-conditioned car; that pretty summer sunlight hid a humid 98 degrees that was still climbing. He snapped off the radio and wiped the old, sour sweat from his face with the short sleeve of his white dress shirt.

*Gone, she was gone, like all the others, gone —*

Ted had lain in bed feeling cold, almost as though his mind was detached from his body. For over a month, she had been ignoring him and rejecting him. Now she was making overtures again, but he had retreated somehow. He felt as though he had used himself up and had no energy left now. Maybe it wasn't her, though. Perhaps it was something else.

"What's wrong?" She had her arms around him.

He didn't answer right away. The dark room was warm enough, but he wasn't.

"Hmm?"

"I don't know." His voice came out in a rough whisper.

"Do you want to talk about it?"



He didn't have anything to talk about. "No."

She was quiet for a moment. "Do you want to . . . you know?"

"I don't think so."

Quickly, she withdrew her arms and rolled over, with her back to him. He knew she was hurt, but he couldn't move. He was already hurt.

Ted lay awake a long time, wanting to be held, wanting her to roll back over — but wanting her to do it of her own accord. Asking would spoil it.

They drifted apart slowly over many months, Ted wanting her to say she'd stay with him no matter what, and her saying, instead, she'd only stay if, if, if . . .

He never explained.

He took a deep breath to shake himself away from the pain and panic. Ahead of him, through the gray tint of the windshield, a windbreak of leafy green trees swayed soundlessly in the breeze. Rows of green corn fluttered on this side of them. Closer, telephone poles stood in a stolid file, shrinking around a bend and into the distance.

In the mirror, the little town was so quiet and serene that it seemed unreal, at least from the cool protection of the humming Camaro. He had been occupied with his thoughts during the entire drive, reviewing for the thousandth time all the mistakes he had made, everything he had done to drive her away, without wanting to or meaning to, or understanding what he was doing.

He looked out the passenger window at the gas pumps. They were old, perhaps from the '50s, maybe even the '40s. They had round fixtures on the top with the scraped and faded hint of some forgotten brand name in reddish paint. The bodies of the pumps were heavily rusted, and the hoses long rotted away.

*Yeah, this might be the place — if a place like that could exist.*

Ted shook his head. No, mysticism didn't exist; it only occurred in fairy tales. And happily-ever-after just didn't happen.

Yet he hurt badly, and he was tired of hurting. He had driven all the way out here to this nowhere town after reading about this special doorway . . . in a piece of fiction that no one could possibly believe. The town was real, though, and in the right place, and this gas station fit the description.

It might be the place where lost things go — impossibly, magically, ridiculously. If anyone was open to the impossible and the magical and the ridiculous, however, then he was. He was willing to try anything.

"Okay, chump," he said aloud. He slipped on his sunglasses, shut off the engine, and opened the door. The hot, humid air hit him like a solid wall. He stood, locked the door, and slammed it shut, feeling the warm breeze against his shirt.

It really was quiet here. There was no traffic, no machinery, no voices. He started walking toward the little building.

The gas station had always been small. It was made of cinder blocks, or something similar, painted white repeatedly over a period of years. In the many chipped and peeling spots, the different coats were plainly layered. One coat long ago had been red. The windows were boarded up with gray lumber, the same wood as in the endless string of broken-down or partially collapsing old barns all up and down the highway.

Such boards had been nailed crosswise over the door, making multiple Xs. He could still see the doorknob, antique and rusted, but very tight and sound. The rust probably made it more secure than it had ever been when it was in use.

Ted could also see that some of the slats across the doorway were loose, and the door itself damaged behind the boards. A child could maneuver inside; perhaps one had. He leaned down and pulled the end of one board away slightly, using both hands.

*Yeah, I can make it.*

Sweating heavily already, he adjusted his grip on the board and bent it away from the door. It did not come free, but he was able to ease himself behind it and plant one foot firmly inside the hole in the door. Then, with a squat, a twist, and a ducking of his head, he plopped down on a cool floor of unpolished hardwood, in dim light.

Ted was momentarily blinded. His eyes had been accustomed to the bright sunlight and needed a moment to adjust. He removed his dark glasses and stuck them into his shirt pocket.

A long, dim hallway stretched many yards ahead of him, with light showing some distance away. He was no longer in the gas station. This was much too large.

*This is the place, then — the weird one.*

Suddenly feeling shy and uncertain, Ted got to his feet and started walking slowly toward the light. On both sides of him, shelves rose up until they were lost in the darkness above him. He smelled dust and mildew and a faint, sweet scent he couldn't quite name.

*Magic only exists in fairy tales — and if this fairy tale is for real, then anything can happen. Maybe I could even win back what I lost.*

With hope inflating his chest, he raised his head as he walked. The light up ahead streamed weakly down the corridor toward him, outlining irregular shapes on the shelves with a soft sheen. Most of them were containers, he saw — bottles and jars and boxes and crates of all sizes and colors and substances.

A swirling green light caught his eye on one shelf, about chest high. He stifled his curiosity and passed on. Then a whistling from another shelf got his attention. Feeling a sudden chill along the back of his neck, he stepped quickly away.

"It's all right," said a woman's voice in a casual tone.

Ted gasped and whirled to his left. She was standing right in front of him,

in a small aisle that intersected with a large corridor.

"There's no need to be frightened." She spoke in a calm, sympathetic tone that reassured him somewhat.

"Uh, hi." Ted tried to laugh, but it came out sounding nervous and uncertain. He saw that she was young, perhaps in her late twenties, and wrapped in a crocheted shawl. In the poor light, he could not make out her features very well. "My name's Ted Chun."

"I'm Melinda Su. I'll be with you in just a moment. You will wait, won't you? I have one customer ahead of you."

"Oh. Uh, sure."

"I won't be long." She turned and started toward the lit area in the center of the shop.

Ted hesitated, then followed her at a distance. He didn't want to stand in the shadows here all alone.

In a pool of light ahead, he saw a tall, slender man with a hooked nose and iron-gray hair swept neatly back over his ears onto his shoulders. He wore a dark gray suit, and had his arms folded firmly across his white shirt and blue tie. He reminded Ted of a television preacher, except that his hair was too long.

Ted also saw, now, that the woman was quite pretty. She gave the tall, stern man a smile.

"May I help you, sir? Are you familiar with our shop?"

"Socks," he declared.

"Are you familiar with our —"

"I want my socks." He began tapping one foot.

"Which socks would these be?" She gave no sign of annoyance at all.

Ted thought, though, he could see amusement in her smile.

"For years, now, I've been losing socks. I'm sick of it. In the laundry, you know. But you never lose a pair, do you? Only one out of a pair, over and over and over. I want all my socks back."

"All of them?" She pursed her lips together, trying to keep her smile under control.

"Well . . . maybe just the clean ones." He glanced around at the shelves cautiously.

"I think I can help." She looked all around the shelves, until she saw a small spot of white light on one, just above her head. "Ah. This way, sir." The spot of light began to move. She followed it, and the stern man followed her.

Ted started after them as quickly as he dared. His footsteps seemed loud on the wooden floor, and he took long strides to minimize his number of steps. He did not want to attract attention, but he had to watch.

Ted trailed them through a maze of aisles, keeping to the middle in order to avoid the musty, dusty shelves and their mysterious objects. Some of the items gleamed momentarily as he passed; others seemed to stand in grand

solemnity. One gave off a faint rustling sound.

"Here we are, sir." Melinda and the tall man were only silhouettes in the dim corridor, but the spot of light shone brightly on a big olive-green duffel bag that was crowded onto a bottom shelf. "You may take it."

"Hm. Well." The tall man unfolded his arms and bent slightly to look. "The duffel bag, eh?" He took the cloth grip in both hands and pulled the heavy bag off the shelf onto the floor. Then he hitched his pant leg at the knee and squatted on heel and toe to open it.

Ted could see him pull small, flimsy shapes from the duffel bag and lift them up. Socks — they were really socks. He felt a pang of disappointment. Unlike that guy, he had come here for something much deeper. Perhaps he had been mistaken after all.

"Well, well." The man's profile nodded sharply. "Yes, I recognize this one. The monogram, you know." He looked up at her. "I'll just pack up here. Thank you very much."

As they returned up the aisle, Ted darted into a side passage and waited for them to go by. When the tall man had left, Ted walked up to Melinda again.

"Oh, there you are, Ted. Now. I'm sure you're anxious, so I want to say that I'm here to help. All right?"

"All right. Um, about what I'm looking for —"

"Ted, I can't guarantee what will happen when you find it. That will depend on you and — and it. Not everyone is happy with what they've asked for. But you don't even have to tell me what it is. If you're ready, you can follow me."

"Yes! I mean, yes, I'm ready. Thanks."

Ted folded his arms and rubbed them as he followed her. The air here was cool, and he had been sweaty when he entered. They turned down narrow corridors that grew darker as the shelves grew higher and more crammed with objects.

"It's darker over here than in most of the aisles." Melinda offered a light, conversational tone. "As long as you can see well enough to stay with me, it may be just as well."

Ted hurried to keep up with her, but sneaked nervous glances at the shelves on both sides. They turned several corners and walked down another narrow aisle. At one point, he smelled sulfur; later, he thought he smelled a freshly-mowed lawn. Finally, she stopped in front of a closed door.

"I never saw this before." She spoke softly, as if to herself. Then she turned to him. "I don't think my friend knows about it, either — the other person who, uh, is here. He's with someone else right now, but he would have told me about a door like this."

Ted nodded, looking over the closed door with a sort of exciting dread.

"I'll open it for you. Then I think you should go in alone."

"You never saw it before? You mean you don't have any idea what's in

there?"

"Ted, I hardly ever know exactly what's in *anything* around this place. But if you're careful, it's not usually dangerous. You came here looking for something you lost, right?"

"Love," Ted whispered.

"What?"

"Lost love." He shrugged apologetically in the dark.

"Whatever you lost is here. Are you ready? I'll open it."

Ted's heart was pounding, and he could feel the warm sweat on his face and neck again, despite the coolness of the place. "Okay." It came out in a hoarse whisper. "Open up."

She reached out from under her shawl to grasp the doorknob. It turned with a click and the door creaked as she slowly pushed it open. He took a deep breath and stepped forward, shoving it farther open, out of her hand.

The room before him was also dim, and shaded entirely in blues — indigos, he thought. It was a Victorian bedroom. The walls were blue, the fireplace was blue, the hardwood floor was blue. So was the portrait of a man on the wall over the stone fireplace, the bust of a man on a blue night table, and the canopied bed that dominated the entire blue room.

So was the naked, sleeping woman on the bed, at least in this light.

*It's her*, he realized suddenly, and held his breath. He moved forward carefully, so his steps wouldn't make the wooden floor creak. Yes, it was her peaceful dreaming face, framed by the light brown curly hair, long and bluish here. It was her nimble, slender body, lying on top of the rumpled blue covers. He paused by the side of the bed, looking down, luxuriating in the sight of her.

*What's she doing here? It's still all over between us, but — maybe here it could be different.*

"Maybe," he whispered to himself, very softly.

She slept, with a relaxed face that neither frowned nor smiled. Her breathing was deep and slow.

"I love you," he whispered. "I always have. I'm so . . . just so *sorry*." Warm tears filled around his eyes.

Still she slept, naked in the bluish light.

She was at rest, sleek and slender and unknowing.

Slowly, watching her face, he reached down to touch her thigh. It was warm and firm. The moment he felt her flesh, though, her eyes shot open in surprise. She looked at him — and screamed, horrified. She scrambled into a sitting position with her back against the headboard.

"No — no, no, it's me. It's Ted." Ted spoke frantically, but she screamed again as she stared at his face, not recognizing him, and his words were drowned out.

Ted took a step backward and movement in the window over the bed caught his eye. No, it was not beyond the window, but his own reflection in

the glass; he could tell because the image moved as he did. Yet he saw, as he looked at himself, a huge, grotesque demon — scaly, reptilian, cloven-hooved . . . and blue.

Staring in shock just as she was, he backed quickly to the open doorway. He slipped out and turned.

Ted was suddenly back in the cool, quiet darkness of the mystic shop again. He stood motionless, trying to get his emotions under control.

"I heard, Ted," said Melinda. "Why don't you take a moment to yourself, and I'll be right back with you. I have another client."

Ted nodded, but when she started away, he hurried after her. He still did not want to be alone here. When she reached the other visitor, though, he dropped back and waited in the shadow of a huge crate suspended from the ceiling.

This visitor was a woman perhaps in her late twenties, wearing blue jeans and a long-sleeved turtleneck shirt. She clutched a shoulder bag protectively against her abdomen.

"Can I help you?" Melinda asked pleasantly.

"Hope. I've lost hope." The woman's voice was low and hoarse, as though she had been crying.

"I see. If —"

"I didn't get custody of my son when I was divorced. I was working and in school and there were — were . . ." She shook her head and started over. "I only got monthly visitation rights. I'm losing touch with my son, even though I do see him. . . . I've just lost hope of, you know, really being his mother. We're hardly even acquainted any more, and . . ." She started fumbling in her purse for a tissue.

"I believe I can help. Please come with me."

The woman nodded into her tissue and followed Melinda.

Ted hesitated, as before, and then went after them at a polite distance. This time they did not go far. Melinda pointed to a cut crystal goblet, sealed with a dark blue wax over the broad open top. It held a clear liquid.

"Take that down very carefully and peel off the wax. If you drink what's inside, you'll be okay."

"Ugh. Are you sure?" The woman wrinkled her nose.

Melinda's voice was gentle. "You're looking for your lost hope?"

The woman nodded and rose up on tiptoe to take the goblet down with both hands. It facets twinkled in the spot of light playing across it. Slowly, she pried the wax loose and drew it back. She sniffed the contents, then raised the goblet and drank.

*Hope*, Ted thought. It was an abstract, not like socks — of all things.

"Well." The woman lowered the goblet and smiled self-consciously.

"That's that, I guess, huh?"

"Do you feel any different?" Melinda wrapped her shawl more tightly around her shoulders.

"No — well, yes . . . a little." She shrugged shyly, and they started up the aisle toward Ted. "Why, I suppose I do. Thank you very much."

Ted ducked out of their way and stood in a tight aisle next to a wooden chest smelling of salt and kelp until the other woman had gone, presumably with the crystal goblet.

Melinda stood waiting for Ted with a gracious smile, and he followed her back to the same doorway as before.

"Ted, I don't know quite what this door is. Your light, though — the one that leads me to the appropriate spot here in the emporium — is back on the door. I know you can't see your own light, but I can. All I can suggest is that you try the door again."

Ted looked at the closed door for a moment. He could go in or he could go home. Swallowing, he opened the door and stepped inside.

He was in another bedroom, this one wildly red in decor: alizarin red.

Disoriented, Ted held his breath and took in the scene. It looked like some Renaissance painting. Heavy velvet drapes of brownish reds were drawn aside to reveal a richly-caparisoned bed with pink sheets and carved wooden legs and a polished night table. Golden-red drapes hung behind the bed.

The woman reclining on the bed was red, and naked, and awake. She was watching him with a cynical, sensual smile. One of her knees was drawn up; the nearer leg was angled out over the edge of the bed, with her toes on the floor.

*It's her again.* The lights had shifted color, he supposed, and now she knew him. Despite the weird red everywhere and the strange room, it was her — and he knew that look on her face. She was hot, and ready, and waiting for him.

His pulse was racing. He started forward, and then shapes behind the bed caught his eye. Startled, he stopped in surprise.

Over the bed, from behind one of the drapes, a golden cherub hovered over her — a winged baby leering down at her from above. To its left, from behind another curtain, a tall figure wrapped in an armless robe leaned out with a grinning skull. They were motionless.

Ted hesitated, afraid they would somehow come to life. They did not, however. They were just sculptures.

On the bed, she smiled at him more broadly, still in the sneer of raw lust.

Entranced, with his blood pounding, Ted walked slowly forward, gazing up and down the length of her red body, and at the open sexual hunger on her face.

She shifted slightly to face him, with her eyes wide and challenging over her raw smirk.

Ted drew in a deep breath and reached for her.

A whirl of red spun swiftly out of her body with the roar of flames in an updraft. Ted gasped and reared back, staring upward. From her pelvis, a second female torso had arisen, naked and fiery. It grew long arms that

curled upward into predatory claws, and the head that formed was that of a monstrous lust, skull-like and sunken-eyed and white-fanged, a vision that mocked and mirrored his own blazing intensity.

Ted backed away, terrified yet fascinated, until he had eased out the doorway. He slammed the door shut and fell hard against it, eyes closed. This was not the adventure he had hoped for.

Then, alarmed, he opened his eyes to see where he was. Instinctively, he reached back for the doorknob and opened it for another escape.

He was in yet another bedroom, but this one looked almost normal. The room was decorated in purple and beige, but it was a normal decor, with a realistic mix of colors. The large double bed on the right was empty, and covered with a shiny bedspread of deep purple. Across the clear, plush carpet, to his left, a naked woman sat before a dresser brushing her hair.

It was her, again, but this time she was oblivious to him.

Ted swallowed and watched her cautiously as he caught his breath. Before, she had seemed familiar: lying asleep in the blue room — and reclining, awake and challenging, in the red room. Here she seemed different. The room was contemporary, but he had never seen her sit at a dresser before. He had never known her to spend any time brushing her hair before, either. He felt out of sync, as though he was watching her perhaps in the past, before he knew her, or maybe in the future, long after they had parted.

He knew better, now, than to approach her. All he did was watch.

She brushed her long, curly hair and then set the brush down on the dresser. With a toss of her head, she lifted a golden-hooped earring in both hands and fastened it to her ear, still looking at herself in the mirror.

Movement caught his eye at the far end of the room. A full-length oval mirror hung in a standing wooden frame there, and a human figure was stepping out of it, into the room. The woman at the dresser did not notice.

Ted watched as another naked woman stepped cautiously onto the deep, soft carpet, looking around. She didn't seem to see the woman at the dresser, or him, either. *That's her, too*, he suddenly realized.

It was she as he had known her, in her mid-thirties.

He glanced back at the woman seated before the dresser, who was now leaning toward her mirror as she applied makeup. She was younger than the other figure — quite a bit, he could see now. He guessed she was around twenty.

He looked back at the older figure, wondering if they would become aware of each other, and then he stiffened in surprise. She had been aging, and continued to age, quickly, as she walked carefully and tentatively toward the bed.

A whimpering drew Ted's attention to his right. A little girl of perhaps seven stood crying, with her face in her hands, by the side of the bed. Ted could not see her face, but he understood that it was she again, as a small child. He wanted to kneel down and throw his arms around her, but he



didn't dare. His eyes began to sting with tears again, as he watched her helplessly.

Hurting and crying, he turned and groped for the doorway, blinking away tears. He found the door ajar and slipped out, pulling it shut behind him.

"Ted? Are you okay?" It was the woman in the mystic shop, standing in the dim light of the long, dusty corridor.

Ted nodded, and wiped his eyes with one hand.

"Take your time, Ted," she said quietly.

Ted swallowed and took a deep breath. Now the darkness and silence in the weird shop seemed safe and familiar. The strange bottles and tinted jars on the dusty shelves were a comfort.

"It didn't work out, did it?"

Ted shook his head.

"I saw what happened. You kept leaving the door open, and I followed you. I've seen strange . . . things here before, but these rooms were just about the most extreme. Was . . . that what you were looking for?"

"Not really." Ted's voice was hoarse. "I lost her love. I'm not sure exactly what was in those rooms."

"Was she the one, though? The right woman?"

"Yes. It was she. Only, I didn't find any lost love there."

"What did you find?"

"Well, I — I guess I don't know."

"Like in that room that was all blue. What made her scream like she did?"

"I woke her up. Touched her. Um, she was . . . kind of vulnerable, I guess." Ted remembered the vision of himself as a demon, but chose not to mention it.

"You threatened her."

"I didn't mean to. I guess she thought I did." He forced a weak smile. "That used to happen, sometimes, between us. I didn't really mean for it to."

"In the red room, it looked like she split in two or something."

"Lust." Ted's mouth formed the word, but he barely whispered.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't hear you."

"Lust. I mean, it was like lust instead of love. All hot and, uh . . . Me, too. When I was there. Everything else just vanished for me, except her and our mutual . . . uh . . ."

"Is that why you walked toward her? I wondered."

Ted nodded. He managed another trace of a smile. "Sometimes that used to happen with us. When we, uh, heated up, you might say, the rest of the world just disappeared for a while."

"Perhaps I shouldn't be prying like this. I'm sorry."

"No, it's all right. The last room? That was the craziest. I mean, in the first two, I thought it was her, even though she can't possibly be here. But in

the last room, the purple one, she was there in three stages at once."

"I thought so, since purple is blue and red combined, but I wasn't sure. Do you understand it?"

"I'm not too certain. Partly, it's her life without me, before and after. There's more, though. The little girl is crying, and the young woman is doing something she normally doesn't do. And the older one is aging by the second. I think it has something to do with the way she's made her decisions, or something like that. Being desperate, and giving up more than she really wants to."

"Since this is what you found here, this must be what you lost."

"Sure, I lost all these parts to the relationship when it ended. But I came here looking for the love I lost. You said it would be here."

"Anything you lost *is here*. I thought that what you wanted would be there, behind the door. If it wasn't, I don't really know why."

Ted turned impulsively and grabbed the knob. With a sharp intake of breath, he turned it and opened the door one more time.

She was standing in front of him, arms folded across her chest, puffing on a cigarette nervously. The room was empty except for her; she stood on a plain hardwood floor. She was wearing her tight, faded jeans and an old yellow sweater.

"Hello," Ted said quietly.

"Hi." Her voice was hard and cautious.

"I, uh — it's nice to see you."

"You're not red any more."

Startled, Ted glanced away for a moment. "Uh, neither are you." He managed a weak smile. "The room isn't purple any more, either."

"Was that you in the blue room? Waking me up? That monster looked a little like you, but . . ." She shrugged stiffly.

"I didn't realize what I looked like to you, when I went in. I just wanted to talk."

"What for?"

"You still don't believe me, I guess."

"About what?" She was brusque and impatient.

"About my really loving you. Wanting you." He tried to smile, but couldn't. "Loving you."

She avoided his eyes. "In the red room, did I . . . look different to you? Like you looked to me in the blue room?" She puffed quickly on her cigarette.

"Why — yes." Ted realized, for the first time, that she had probably felt normal there, despite her appearance, just as he had not realized at first that he looked like a demon to her in the blue room.

"I must have scared you, I suppose." She looked at him furtively, for a reaction, then turned aside again.

"You turned into a kind of demon, yourself."

"Actually, I was hoping you'd talk to me. Civilly, you know. Without accusations."

"Did you — what are you doing here? Did you come to this shop looking for something you lost, too?"

"What shop?"

"Well, this . . ." Ted trailed off, puzzled.

"The last thing I remember is going to bed. Or I should say, drifting off to sleep in my bed." Her mouth twisted into a tight, amused smile. "Maybe I'm dreaming. You're not even here."

"I wish I was dreaming." Ted also smiled at the irony. For a moment, the tension seemed to ease. "Maybe we scared each other away from communicating. After those rooms, I can see that. I know I'm too late with this, but I do love you."

"Oh, yes . . . instead of someone of your own background. A Chinese American instead of me. Well, you took too long. If you really wanted me, you would have decided a lot sooner. You would have been a lot faster. You still want a Chinese American, deep down. No, you don't really want me. You just think you do. It'll pass, believe me."

"You have no right to say that. Especially after you refused to listen to me, so many times. I know how I feel, but you don't. You can't. Anyway, I do love you. I . . . do know I took a long time to come around to it."

She said nothing.

"What was going on in the purple room?" He asked.

She looked up sharply. "I didn't see you there."

"I wasn't there very long. But I didn't understand it too well."

"It didn't have much to do with you. It had to do with where I'm going with my life. But it made something clear to me. My feelings for you are gone. I know that now."

Ted lowered his gaze, burdened by disappointment. "I came here for something I lost. I can't get it, can I?"

She dropped her cigarette half-smoked onto the floor and ground it out with a sandaled foot. "You were totally insensitive. You were selfish. You didn't start out that way, but you turned that way. Do you remember that one night, the first one when you wouldn't talk to me?"

"I think I know the one."

"When I already had my arms around you."

Ted nodded.

"We just re-lived it, didn't we?"

"In the blue room, where you saw me as a demon, and in the red room, where I saw you as one. What about the purple room?"

"That was just for me, I think. For deciding where I'm going and what I want."

"And I'm not part of it, since I lost your love."

She shook her head. "You didn't lose it. You destroyed it. That's part of

what I've come to realize from all this. Now, would you just . . ." She forced a phony, edged smile and shooed him with a hand motion.

That was true. It was right — he knew it the moment he heard it. That was why her love wasn't there; he hadn't lost it at all.

Still looking at her morose figure, he slowly backed out of the doorway for the last time. He closed it behind him quietly. Then he turned, in the darkened shop once more, and raised his gaze to the woman standing in the aisle.

"I heard," she said. "I'm very sorry, Ted."

Ted nodded without looking at her, and walked slowly up the corridor, staring numbly at the shadowed floor. He had destroyed the love he wanted, actively though not willfully. That was the message of those strange rooms, which showed him what he had lost — and, by omission, what had not been lost, but killed.

With trancelike ease, Ted found his way through the darkened aisles. Nothing on the shelves was more horrible to him than his new knowledge. He climbed easily through the loose boards over the hole in the door and straightened up, standing once more outside the little gas station in Bosworth, Missouri.

Ted squinted in the sunlight and put on his dark glasses. Pain still pursued him, but the panic was gone. Not everything that vanished had been lost, and fairy tales — he had always known — just didn't happen. ❧

## A SHORT SLEW OF SF CLERIHIEWS

Isaac Asimov

Has foes who would pass him off

As a threat to our nation.

(This charge is without Foundation.)

Robert Heinlein

Said, "There's more than a fine line

"Between an office-worker's day and my day.

"Still, T.G.I.F."

Frank Herbert

Has a passion for sherbert

Which has a tendency to ruin

Anything he is Dune.

— Esther M. Friesner

**DRAGONET**  
by Esther M. Friesner  
art: George Barr



*After a number of story sales to us and other publications, Esther M. Friesner is moving forward as a writer with the sale of a fantasy novel to Avon (working title: Mustapha and His Wise Dog). In her spare time she is a camp follower of the 5th Connecticut Regiment (a colonial-garbed unit in which her husband Walter Stutzman is the drummer), and has written plays for the Society for Creative Anachronism.*

This is the castle — Righteous Garde. Here over eight hundred knights, ladies, lackeys, squires, toadies, and the odd monarch live and work together in peace and harmony. Only sometimes harmony's too much to ask. That's where I come in. My name's Britomart. I'm a damsel. It's a dirty job, but someone's got to do it.

839 A.D. The Dark Ages were well under way, and most of the ladies were counting the months until the Norsemen showed up to carry them off. I was catching up on my tapestry work. Just then, Helios came in. He's my partner. He's a unicorn.

"How's your latest maiden, Helios?" I asked.

"Eaten. Dragon."

"Sorry."

"Those are the breaks."

Helios is a good unicorn. You don't get many like him these days. I could see something was on his mind. "Spill it."

"We've got a 403."

I couldn't believe it. We hadn't had a 403 in years. Rogue mage. "You sure, Helios?"

"I'd stake my horn on it. Got it from a wood elf."

"Wood elves lie."

"Not this one. Mage changed him into a squirrel from the waist down. Hard to argue with that."

I put down the tapestry frame. "Let's investigate. We'll use the black-and-white."

I was proud of the black-and-white. Not many castles had one. Not many would. It was a bear. Not your ordinary bear, but a foreign model, imported all the way from the mountains of Cathay. "You have to move with the times, Britomart," the king had told me. "It doesn't pay to keep local bears any more. They put away too much food, then they're out of service for most of the winter."

We found the black-and-white in his stall, eating bamboo. He got up when he saw me and bowed. "Does Lady Britomart have use for this unworthy bear?" Can't beat these imports when it comes to style.

"We've got a 403."

"Rogue mage," Helios said for the bear's benefit. By the way, his name's Ch'a. It's a weird name, but someone's got to have it.

We hitched up Ch'a to the panda-wagon and headed for the Forest Perilous. Hard to believe that Righteous Garde, with all its beauty and intrigue, is less than a basilisk's spit from the Forest Perilous. It's a tough place. You've got your elves. You've got your moss-wives. You've got your wyverns and your sometime-trolls. When they can't make it in the big epics, they head for the woods. They're young, they're failed, and they're bitter. It doesn't pay to go there unless you're looking for distress. But distress is my business. Like I said, I'm a damsel.

Helios took us straight to the elf. If he'd been changed into a squirrel from the waist down, he'd also been changed into a squirrel from the neck up, years ago. Inside, I mean. That's the trouble with these wood elves. Wood alcohol. His tiny little eyes were so bloodshot, they looked like a pair of juniper berries.

"Lee' me 'lone," he mumbled. He wiped his slobbering mouth with the tip of his furry grey tail.

"Sober up, point-ear." Helios is tough. Tough, but fair. "We're here to help you."

"Huh! Castle folk! When you ever help us elves, huh? Ge' one look at one of us inside your damn castle and call the 'sterminators." He belched loudly and sang something quaint. Quaint, but obscene.

"You get in the castle, you spend your time looking up the ladies' skirts, short stuff," said Helios. "You don't want this horn somewhere vital, you'll cooperate. This is the damsel Britomart. Tell her what you told me."

"Damsel?" The elf gave me a canny look.

"That's what it says on my card."

"If you're a damsel, I'm a —"

"Watch it!" Helios threatened the elf with one sharp hoof.

"Yah! Real brave, ain'tcha? When it's the little people you're stepping on. But wait until you hit that wizard, horn head! He'll turn you into unicorn on the cob and have you for lunch."

"What wizard?" I asked.

"'What wizard?' she asks! Sure, I *always* run around this cockamamie forest with a craving for acorns! 'What wizard?' " The elf was ticked. Ticked elves aren't a pretty sight.

"Just the facts, elf."

"Oh, a tough honey. O.K., you think you're tough, you go down this path, turn left at the well of lost souls, double around the swamp of the hanging men, two grave-mounds on your right, and when a dragon eats you, you're there."

A real class neighborhood.

"This wizard have a name?"

"Mildred." Like I said, ticked elves aren't your Mr. Nice Guy.

The black-and-white got us there fast. I had to unhitch him from the wagon when we hit the swamp, though. Too boggy for wheels. No one said this was going to be an easy job. The dragon was waiting. He guarded the wizard's lair. He was big, but you learn fast that size isn't everything in this kingdom. He let out a roar when he saw us. It didn't faze Helios.

"Go ahead, worm," he said. "Make my day." The dragon charged. Helios slew him. He made a minor earth tremor when he hit the ground. The wizard came out of his den to see what was up.

"What have you done to Mildred?" He was one angry mage.

"Dragon gets out of line, dragon takes what's coming. Those are the

breaks," I said. "We're here to investigate a complaint. You turn an elf into a squirrel?"

"Half a squirrel."

"You admit it. Why'd you do it?"

The wizard stroked his beard. I didn't like the way he looked at me. "Who wants to know?"

"If he doesn't like the report I bring back, maybe the king wants to know. Turning elves into squirrels is a felony. Turn him back, and maybe we can settle out of the royal court. Don't make it tough on yourself."

"Half a felony."

"A wise guy." Helios has a good sneer, for a 'corn. He lowered his horn at the wizard's chest. "O.K., smart man. This is a forty-four spell unicorn's horn, the most powerful piece of *mana* known to sorcery. Now I can't exactly remember whether I've used forty-four of the annihilation spells in it, or only forty-three, so if you don't answer the damsel Britomart's questions real polite, maybe you can ask yourself, 'Am I feeling *lucky* today?' "

"You don't scare me," said the mage. He disappeared.

"Where'd he go?" Helios was baffled.

"Respectfully beg to point out presence of second large dragon," said Ch'a. This time, it was a fire-breather. This time, Helios was the one whose luck ran out.

The dragon grabbed me. Ch'a hid. Helios smoldered. He'd been a good unicorn. I was sorry to see him go. But right now I had other problems.

"That elf was small potatoes, sugar," the dragon said. "I'm taking over this kingdom."

"It's a fool's game and you know it, mage. Give yourself up. The king'll be lenient."

"The king will be *dead*! The whole kingdom will die, unless it submits to me!"

"Big talk. You two-bit thaumaturges think that just because you can take the hicks on market day with the old shell game, you can take the kingdom. I've seen your kind come and go. Mostly they go. And it's not a pretty sight when they do."

The dragon laughed. He was big, all right, big and golden, but he still had the mage's eyes. I didn't like them. "It won't be a pretty sight, my dear? Then you should be happy you won't be around to see it! Say your prayers, damsel, for you shall be the first to perish!"

"No prayers. Just let me say goodbye to the bear."

"Bear? What bear?"

Ch'a emerged timorously from the underbrush. "If the august and majestic dragon-king would not find it too great an inconvenience, this unworthy bear would be most grateful for the opportunity to bid his beloved Lady Britomart farewell."

"A touching last request. Granted." The dragon-mage set me down, but



kept one paw on the hem of my dress.

"So long, Ch'a," I said. "Sometimes this business gets away from you. But you have to take the good with the bad."

"This humble bear is distressed beyond words," said Ch'a. He was crying.

"Don't cry," I said. "You'll serve other damsels. You've been a good partner. Go back to the castle." He turned to go. "Hey!" He stopped. I gave him a kiss for luck. "You be careful out there."

The black-and-white skin slipped off in my hands. A big man in strictly non-reg armor — black-and-white lacquerwork — stood in front of me. He pulled a sword and leaped at the dragon-mage. The dragon-mage laughed. Then his head fell off. Those are the breaks.

I made my report to the king. Things were back to normal in the forest. The squirrel-elf was disenchanted. Who isn't, these days? We'd need a new unicorn and maybe a new bear to pull the wagon. Ch'a introduced himself. He was a warrior from an island beyond Cathay, turned into a bear by one of those hotshot Eastern wizards. I'd broken the spell with my kiss.

"Good work, Britomart."

"Just doing my job, Sire."

I married Ch'a. You can't stay a damsel forever. You can try, but it's a fool's game.

There are eight million stories in the Forest Perilous. This has been one of them.



## MORE SF CLERIHEWS

L. Ron Hubbard

Is still hiding in my cupboard  
To lend himself an air of mystery.  
The rest is History.

Anne McCaffrey of Pern

Has a thing or two to learn.  
Most folk are fed up to their gizzards  
With fire-lizards.

Larry Niven

Will never be forgiven  
For being talented, healthy,  
And independently wealthy.

— Esther M. Friesner

# EVERYBODY DRAWS LINES

by Carol Deppe

art: John Lakey





*Dr. Deppe was minding her own business painting the house one day when she realized that she'd rather be writing an SF story — and things have never been the same since. She rather blames us for aiding and abetting.*

*This is her first fiction sale; previous publication has been in the likes of Journal of Molecular Biology. Her doctorate (Harvard) is in biology, specializing in genetic control mechanisms. She currently lives in Oregon.*

The campus was quiet. The biological laboratories were dark save for one bank of windows that corresponded to the laboratories and offices of the Elsa Bierman group.

Elsa pushed her chair back from the microscope. Her hand trembled as she reached for the beaker of sand and seaweed that she'd scooped up from the beach. Entranced, she stared at the little grey-green things that crawled, amoeba-like, on the debris. Then she set the beaker down and closed her eyes. For ten minutes she sat motionless. Then she went to the phone and made the first of fourteen terse calls.

"Carl, can you come in to the lab tonight? It's an emergency."

"Be right over."

"It has no nuclei," Elsa repeated. She'd brought the phase contrast microscope into the conference room. She paced restlessly while one by one the fourteen members of her group examined the slides. She had summoned the entire group . . . even Dan, the undergraduate who had joined just last week, and who still called her "Dr. Bierman."

"There is plenty of intracellular membrane," Elsa said. "There are vacuoles. But there are no nuclei, no mitochondria, no chloroplasts . . . no large organelles at all.

"I ran DNA, RNA, and protein assays." She paused. "There is also no DNA."

Fourteen faces, most of them already white, looked at her in dead silence.

"The meteor showers!" Carl whispered. "That unpredicted meteor shower!"

"Right. This thing is not from Earth. That meteor shower was about a week ago. That's time enough to have plasmodia all over the beach, if they are growing exponentially."

Elsa sat down and watched their reactions. They were her students, her protégés, her children. She loved them. And they were reacting well. Scared, yes, of course — but no denials. No refusals to face fact. And excited, tensely excited. Elsa smiled inwardly. *Two hours ago I was moaning that I even have a group*, she thought. She remembered her drive to the beach — her attempt to swim and walk herself into exhaustion. *I was long-*

ing for the good old days, when I did the work with my own two hands — no administrating, no supervising, no managing. She shook her head. What has to be done now could never be done by one person in a few hours. I'm glad I have them. They're a good bunch.

Elsa glanced at her watch. "It's ten o'clock. I'll give us one hour to think and argue and design experiments. We'll work till six in the morning. Then we'll meet again and put it all together. At seven we'll call every newsroom we can reach with a statement."

Kathy laughed. "No one can say the Bierman group publishes slow!"

Everybody laughed. They needed to.

Good, Elsa thought. *It breaks up the fear when you laugh. I want the right amount of fear. Enough to be a stimulus. Not so much that we get paralyzed.* She got up and filled the pot to make coffee. It was a simple, homey task. She did it on purpose . . . it decreased the tension . . . helped turn the meeting into a normal brainstorming session.

The man behind the oval desk had been up all night. He looked it. He hung up the phone and turned to his aides. "The thing's in stable orbit now."

The door opened. "Mr. President!"

"Yes, John."

"Bulletin from UPI. Some professor in California says that there's a life form that's not from Earth that's crawling all over the beaches!"

The President read the bulletin. "This has been released?"

"Yes. UPI said that it has gone to every other news service as well as most major newspapers. There was no way they could hold it."

"All right." The President reread the bulletin more slowly. When he was through, he stared at the wall for several minutes. Then he reread the bulletin again, even more slowly. *You can tell it's written by a scientist; they have their own way of using language. It's carefully done . . . a statement of emergency . . . a call to arms . . . enough solid information to create only a sense of emergency, not panic. But there are things she hasn't said.*

*What have I got to lose? If I'm wrong, everyone will laugh at me. Well, that's happened before. I can live through it. And I'll have spent millions of dollars on an unnecessary mobilization. But I won't cry over that either. You have to test a machine occasionally if you expect it to work.*

He handed the bulletin to his secretary of state. "Transmit this to all heads of state — starting with him," he said, motioning at the red phone. "Tell each one that we are going into a state of full military alert, and suggest that they do likewise."

He turned to the young aide. "John, get that woman here."

"Couldn't this just be a hoax?"

"Sure. But it's too much of a coincidence to have a hoax like this just at the time when we have an unidentified satellite orbiting our planet. And anyway, I'd rather take unnecessary preparations than to fail to take neces-

sary ones.”

He picked up a phone and said a single word.

Elsa lay on the couch in her office. The members of her group were still on the phone. Her statement was released. She was proud of it. It was not the best piece of writing she'd ever done, but it would do the trick. *I have some good news and some bad news*, she thought sardonically. *We have, to the fascination of us biologists, been invaded by an extraterrestrial form of life. The good news is that it probably won't harm humans or other land-dwelling animals or plants. The bad news is that, unless we do something awfully clever awfully quick, in just a few days, our oceans will be dead. And now, a word from our sponsors.*

*I'm tired*, she thought. *I'm getting punchy.*

“There is a launch window this afternoon. We'll have to use it. There is no time to program the automatics. All we can do for you is shoot you out and send you directions. You'll have to do everything manually.”

“What are we supposed to do when we get there?”

“We have no idea. That's for the President to say.”

Carl knocked and entered. Elsa was at her desk.

“Dan said to tell you that his friend came through for him. There are ROTC guys, in uniform, at every door. Nobody is getting through but scientists who work here.”

“Good.”

“We interrupt this program to bring you an emergency announcement. By order of the President. All military leaves are cancelled. All military personnel report to your bases. We repeat . . .”

“If you want to play academic games, go play them in some other conference room. I am not the slightest bit interested in whether you think I should have released information. I am not the slightest bit interested in whom you think I should have consulted first. Certainly I would *not* have consulted you! I consider you an incompetent scientist and an incompetent administrator and a personal coward.”

The man got up and left.

“Good!” Elsa said. “There's work to be done here.”

She looked around the table at the faculty — her colleagues. *They are more shocked by my treatment of Ron than by the extraterrestrial organism. Well, good! Maybe they'll be shocked into being functional.*

“We bring you this update and summary from the Bierman laboratory. The alien organism uses double-stranded RNA as its genetic material and

single-stranded RNA as message. Its RNA contains the same four bases that are found in that of Earth organisms. Its protein contains twenty-three amino acids, all of D forms. It lacks proline, tyrosine, tryptophan, and phenylalanine and contains seven amino acids not found in proteins of Earth organisms, and not yet identified.

"The organism grows in sea water with a doubling time of about four hours at 25° centigrade, when using plankton as a food source. In the absence of plankton or marine plants, it induces a photosynthetic mechanism and grows with a doubling time of about forty hours using only sunlight as an energy source.

"The organism encysts . . ."

Elsa reached over and turned off the radio. She pushed her chair back from her desk and twisted around to try to undo the kink in her neck. Carl and Kathy sat on the sofa. All of them were tired.

Carl spoke. "I wouldn't mind knowing how the hell it grows on plankton containing only L amino acids when its own proteins are completely D amino acids. Though I suppose that's the least of our problems."

"I'll make a guess," Elsa said. "I'll bet it degrades the amino acids into one-carbon pieces and uses the pieces to make its own. It may be from a planet where there were two or more independent origins of life . . . if so, there would be advantage in being able to degrade quite alien molecules."

"We don't need to be worrying about how the thing evolved," Kathy snapped. "We need to know how to kill it."

Dan knocked and entered, accompanied by a man in uniform. "I thought I'd better bring this gentleman to see you."

"Dr. Bierman?"

"Yes."

"I am to escort you to the President. There is a plane waiting."

"Very well, Colonel. I've been expecting you." She reached into a drawer and removed a toothbrush and put it in her pocket. Then she turned to Carl and Kathy.

"You know what to do."

They nodded.

The aide introduced her formally. "Mr. President, may I present Dr. Elsa Bierman." The President rose and shook her hand, then indicated a chair. The aide withdrew; they were alone.

He looked at her a moment without speaking — assessing, watching subtleties. Then completely without preliminaries, he said quietly, "Dr. Bierman, please tell me everything you think it might help me to know."

She was surprised, but hesitated only for a moment. Yes, he thought. *That was the right approach.*

"We've run radiation kill curves. The organism is no more resistant to radiation than most earth microorganisms. There is no way it could have

survived a trip through space on a rock or piece of dust or something like that. It came here in a shielded spaceship of some kind. Somebody sent it . . . or brought it."

She paused. *She realizes I am not surprised*, he thought.

When he did not respond, she continued. "We considered the possibility that the organism might be intelligent. After all . . . caterpillars metamorphose into butterflies. The organism might have an intelligent stage in its life cycle that we just haven't seen yet. Well, we don't believe it. The genome size — that is, the total amount of genetic information in the organism — is much too small. It's what we might expect for a very sophisticated microorganism — but no more.

"We put it together this way: There is some intelligent species that intends to colonize our planet. This organism is the first step."

The President nodded in acknowledgement. *That's how we've been figuring it*, he thought. *Her reasons were different from ours, but they add up to the same thing.*

"As for what the organism is going to do . . ." She paused and swallowed hard, then suddenly looked away.

*It's bad*, he thought. *It's really bad. And whatever she'll be willing to say . . . I don't think she thinks we can stop it.*

Elsa rose suddenly and strode over to the window and looked out, an ill-concealed violence in her movements. Then she came back and sat down again.

The President said nothing.

"I'm sorry."

"That's all right," he said gently.

She drew a deep breath. "Here's where it stands. The damned thing eats just about everything. It eats all the microscopic plants and animals that are the bottom of the food chain in the ocean. It also eats every kind of larger marine plant we've tried." Her voice was harsh. She took another deep breath and retreated to tones a bit more like a lecture.

"Normally a predator or herbivore has certain limits on its population size. It may reproduce until it eats up most of its food supply — then it starves, and its numbers drop, and the food organisms recover.

"This organism is different. When it has eaten most of the plankton and plants, it's not going to starve. By Earth standards, it is both animal and plant — it can photosynthesize. So it will continue multiplying, although more slowly, using just the sun for energy. And it will mop up all the remaining plankton and marine plants. The fish and larger animals will start to starve and die long before the plankton are extinct. The alien organism will sterilize the oceans of everything but itself."

The President looked at her in silence for a moment. *It is bad. Much worse than I thought. I didn't realize the implications of the fact that it can photosynthesize.*

"How long do we have?"



"It's much easier to project the end point than the timing. In the laboratory it grows with a doubling time of about four hours under conditions as close as we can get to those of California coastal waters. At that rate, it could exceed the entire biomass of the planet in less than two weeks. In reality, it can't be growing that fast. But it doesn't have to kill all the plankton to do irreparable damage. It's the top of the food chain that's most sensitive. It's not just that the fish can't digest it . . . it gives them diarrhea, so to speak. Even a small per cent of this thing in the diet is enough to prevent a fish from utilizing its food. We won't know how close we are to the end until the fish start dying off."

He repeated his question. "How long do we have?"

"There are too many variables. I'd just be guessing."

"Guess then."

She shrugged. "More than hours. Less than weeks. Days, I think. And not very many."

"Is there any way to kill it?"

"Sure. There are lots of ways. It's just that they won't work in the ocean. The only thing that will work is if it brought its own enemy with it. Most organisms have plasmid or virus information sequences tucked away, latent, in their DNA. Certain kinds of things — radiation, chemical mutagens — can make the virus break out of the cell's DNA and go into its multiplying, disease-causing mode. We are hoping that the same will be true of the alien organism — that it will be carrying one or more cryptic viruses that we can find and use against it. That is what my lab group is doing now. And it's a good guess that half the other molecular biology groups in the country are trying the same thing."

"What's the likelihood that you'll find such a virus?"

"I'm guessing that the probability is high. However, the virus won't be as infective as we'll need. The very fact that the alien species is around means that it is not carrying anything capable of completely destroying itself. And anything less won't be good enough for us. We're looking for viruses, but what we expect to find are weaker ones than what we need. We'll have to deliberately modify them. And that will require knowing the molecular biology of the species in detail. We can do it, given time."

"How much time?"

"A year or two."

The President leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes and thought. *If worse comes to worst . . . what will happen? If all the life in the ocean is destroyed, how many people will starve to death? What nations would be desperate . . . destitute? And could we avoid major war? When people are desperate enough, they'll always turn to war.*

He opened his eyes and looked for a moment at Elsa. "I appreciate your bluntness. It's hard to find technically trained people who are decisive. There will be a meeting of my staff tomorrow at eight. I want you there."

"Yes, Mr. President." She smiled briefly.

He noticed her smile. Yes, he thought. *I did her the courtesy of giving her a direct order instead of asking politely. It makes her a member of my staff. She realizes it.*

"There's another part of the story you don't know. I'll have John fill you in."

*I ruined him, Elsa thought. Did I have to? And how ridiculous! Here we are, faced with the death of the oceans . . . and I'm lying here regretting having run over one particularly asinine colleague in my desperation to get things done. Who cares?*

*I do. I guess that's one of the reasons why I've always avoided administrative things. You do have to run over people, sometimes, when you wield power. You have to mete out reward and punishment. You have to control . . . manipulate.*

*Yes, I was brutal with Ron. It was deliberate. I had a job to do, and it was an emergency. I needed to terrify the incompetents into silence.*

*It was necessary. Why does it bother me so much?*

*Because it's not my style.*

*Well, I did it, and intellectually, I don't regret it. It was a functional administrative thing. If I were an administrative type, I'd have to do that sort of thing all the time if I expected to be competent.*

*I wonder if I'd like myself.*

"I say the issue is not whether to destroy it. It's whether we will be able to destroy it. We have no idea what kinds of weapons it has, or what kinds of defenses. But killing our oceans is an act of war if anything was an act of war."

Elsa sat quietly and listened to the arguments, and thought about the unidentified satellite and about the crew who were due to rendezvous with it in just three hours. Her eyes kept returning to the stack of bulletins in the center of the table — the first reports of fish kills, sighted just this morning. *The beginning of the end*, she thought. *Die-offs of the most sensitive species.*

Finally Elsa spoke. "We have been assuming that the plasmodia are the food organism of the colonizers. There are two other possibilities. First, it may be the bottom of the food chain for the colonizer, but not their direct food. In that case, I'll guess that what the satellite contains is the equivalent of fish — something higher on the food chain that *is* the direct food of the colonizers — and that is due to be released once our oceans are dead of native life and the plasmodia fully established.

"There is another possibility. The plasmodium may not be even the bottom of the food chain for the colonizer. It may be that its only function is destroying native life. The satellite may contain a virus or bacterium or some equivalent that is due to be released after native life is dead — some-

thing that will eliminate the plasmodia and leave the oceans completely empty — ready for introduction of their food species.

"The satellite may be — not an additional problem — it may be the solution. We'd be foolish to destroy it without investigation. If it contains the virus, we want it. We can release it now, ahead of schedule, before native life is dead, and kill off the plasmodia and save ourselves."

Elsa scanned the table for support. *All right*, she thought. *I offer them a hope. A wild hope, admittedly. And they look at me like I'm nuts.* Then she caught a shadow of a grin around the eyes of the President. *Good*, she thought. *He takes this possibility seriously.*

The arguments went on.

"'Fire if fired upon'? It takes a President and a whole roomful of advisors to figure that out?"

"All right, Jim. Don't be sarcastic. It's a bit more complicated than that. We are to consider ourselves investigators, not warriors. But if the satellite threatens the *Theta*, I'm supposed to kill it, even though you're out there."

"Thus vaporizing me in the process."

"Right. In theory. But don't worry. I can't hit the thing from here anyway."

"Huh?"

"The warhead's fine. But the delivery system was never intended to. Deliver anything, that is. It was only meant to look scary on paper. You know . . . we were supposed to trade it off in arms limitations talks, but somehow that fell through. I wish we didn't have the damned thing. It makes me nervous."

"Great. There's a lot they didn't tell me."

"Just think what an honor it will be . . . the first man to contact an alien or alien artifact, or be captured or destroyed by one, as the case may be."

"Right."

United States Air Force Major James Travers — age thirty-seven, electrical engineer, test pilot, veteran of two space flights — did not feel honored. He felt ridiculous.

*I feel like a worm on a hook. Dangle me out here and see what takes me.* He had circled the satellite forty-three times. He had described it in detail. He had then done nothing for over a quarter of an hour. Not doing anything is hard when you're dangling in space.

He spoke into the radiolink. He could be heard only by Alan in the *Theta*, and he was beyond formalities. "Hey, what am I supposed to do now?"

"Just wait. Nevada is talking with the President."

*Great. Maybe I should just knock. Maybe they'll invite me in for a cup of coffee and we can wait together.*

\* \* \*

The President looked at the scientist.

"Tell him to knock," Elsa said.

The President just looked at her.

"Look," she said, irately. "Many animals have territories. Many animals have dens. Either this animal has a sense of privacy or it doesn't. We already know that it builds doors. If it has a sense of privacy, doors will probably sometimes be privacy barriers. If so, the animal will probably have some signal that asks permission to violate privacy. Unless they can see through doors, the signal is probably auditory."

"In other words, anyone who builds doors probably knocks at them?"

"More or less."

"*Theta* to Travers. Knock at the door."

"Roger." *Oh, great! I figured that out ten minutes ago.*

"They don't answer."

"Keep trying."

He kept trying.

For a full ten minutes he knocked and waited, knocked and waited.

"Travers to *Theta*. I'm going to try the door now."

"*Theta* to Travers. Good luck, Jim."

*This door was made to be used by something my size. At least there's that. If I were booby-trapping a thing like this, how would I do it? Maybe the door. But it would be hard to put a disconnect out here. Probably just inside the door will be something I'd better notice fast.*

Jim's heart was pounding violently as he grasped the spokes of the handle with both hands and braced his feet against the body of the satellite. *It could be either way. Counterclockwise is just an Earth convention.* Gingerly, he tried both ways. Nothing happened. It was hard to exert any real pressure. His feet just slipped.

Inside his suit, sweat ran off him. He paused for a moment, breathing deeply, deliberately calming himself. Then he tried again. The door gave slightly.

"Travers to *Theta*. It's opening now. Clockwise." Slowly, little by little, he turned the wheel. Suddenly the door hung free. He swung it aside and looked in. A tunnel. Machinery. Controls. If one of them was a disconnect for a booby-trap, he wasn't going to be able to figure out which it was. He took a deep breath. *Maintenance and preparation space. Doesn't look manned. Too soon to say for sure, but this looks like the equipment of the alien, sans alien.* Jim felt a rush of blood to his head, and took several more deep, calming breaths. His eyes were wet. He wasn't sure whether he was relieved or disappointed.

When he spoke his voice was calm. He radioed to Alan a complete description of everything he could see from outside the door. Once inside, he would lose contact.

Half an hour later, he knew he was alone. And he knew what he felt. Disappointment and relief both, strong, mixed half and half. *We aren't ready for them. But in a few years, we might be.* He headed for the door to report.

"There isn't time!" Elsa said in a low, tense voice. She and one military officer and the President were alone. The lines were open to Nevada.

The officer shook his head. "Let's go through it again. I'll summarize. The satellite seems to be primarily or exclusively a recording device and a launcher. The part that concerns us now is the launcher. There are four types of cannisters in it, as judged by their markings. Three types are all loaded into the launcher in a specific order. There was presumably an additional type that contained the plasmodium that was launched first. A fifth type of cannister is racked in plain sight near the launcher. There seems to be no equipment for moving these type-5 cannisters to the launcher. Loading is apparently intended to be manual. The launching is wired into a computer, but it is also wired into what appears to be a manual override."

Elsa nodded. It was a good summary. "If we had plenty of time, our course of action would be obvious. We'd have the *Theta* bring back one of each type of cannister, and we'd open them and find out what's in them. But there isn't time. We'll have to gamble." She ran her hands through her hair. *Such a large gamble!*

"I expected the launcher and the sequence of cannisters — biological package probes. The second set of probes must contain either the virus or bacterium we need — or the second stage in the food chain of the colonizers. Except for the type-5 probes, I'd know what to do. Release the type-2 probes now, ahead of schedule. Either they'll save us, or at least they won't hurt us. But given the unloaded, type-5 probes — I just don't know. What the Hell are they for?"

*I think they're meant for us,* Jim thought. He hung on to a handhold and examined the cannisters. Shaking his head, he went back to the door. *This isn't going to sound sane. I seem to be spending this whole day feeling ridiculous.*

"You heard me, Alan. I think they're intended for us to use. At first I thought it was just a hunch, and I distrusted it. But now I've thought it through. Listen carefully.

"One. The type-5 cannisters are in plain sight. They're the first thing I noticed as I approached the launcher. Two. The launcher itself is mechanically extremely obvious. None of it is enclosed. Three. The manual controls are really prominent. And there are no other controls near the launcher. Four. The wiring is exposed and obvious. I say it's exactly how I'd build something if I meant it to be used by someone who had never seen it before.

"They want to know what the type-5 cannisters are for. Tell them my opinion. They are an abort. What they mean is this: 'If you are smart enough to get up here and figure this out, we apologize. We didn't know

your planet was occupied. Here's a present. Best wishes. See you soon.' "

For a full two minutes there was no response. When Alan spoke, his voice was formal. "Major Travers, you want me to report these thoughts of yours to Nevada?"

"Yes sir. I do."

The decision came much faster than Jim had expected.

"*Theta* to Travers. Unload the probes in the launcher. Save out two of the type-5 probes. Load the rest of the type-5 probes and fire them."

"Roger."

Elsa spent the time of waiting in her room, alone. John, the President's aide, brought her the reports — for the first half day, more and more fish kills — then no news for nearly a day. Then, finally, came the first reports of dead plasmodia on the beaches. Trembling, Elsa waited for John to leave. Then she lay on the bed and cried.

"It was a gift," Elsa said. "It was a simple gift." She stood at the podium behind the Presidential seal and spoke into the microphones. The President had spoken first, had quietly confirmed the rumors that all the press people had already heard — the plasmodia were dying. What they wanted from Elsa was technical details — but also speculations.

"It's interesting . . ." she continued. "If we'd fired first and asked questions later — we would never have gotten the virus. I'm guessing that that's no accident.

"Look at it from their point of view — it may be that there are very few planets with intelligent life. They *do* take over planets for their own use — but they apparently *do* recognize prior rights of other intelligent species — provided that these species are more curious than aggressive. We barely got in over the line. We were just barely more curious than aggressive. And we were also just barely smart enough — if we define intelligence as the capacity to develop space flight."

"Question. Isn't that awfully arrogant of them?"

"I don't know." Elsa shrugged and grinned. "When I drive my car, I'll slow down or stop to avoid a dog. But I don't stop for the ants. Even if I could see them, I wouldn't stop. Taking them into account would be a nuisance for me . . . and I just don't care about them enough. Everybody draws those kinds of lines."

"I'm not really prepared to take 'no' for an answer," the President said. "But I'm willing to listen to arguments. If it will make you feel better. If you need to get it out of your system." The President grinned.

Elsa grinned in response. She liked the man.

She stood at the window, her back to him. "I suppose it all comes down to

magic," she said, chagrined. "There's so much magic to *doing* science. There's nothing magic about administrating it.

"But yet — I'll admit that what you said is true — I'm sure I *would* have much more impact on the work on the plasmodium as head of the agency you propose than I ever could by working on it myself. But *doing* science is so wild, so romantic, so erotic!"

She stopped suddenly and flushed. *That's not something we usually say. But we all feel that way about it. You've either been there or you haven't.*

She turned back to the President. He wasn't laughing at her. His face was serious.

"I started in engineering," he said.

"What happened?"

"I grew up."

Elsa laughed. "That doesn't tell me very much."

"I liked engineering. Not just the subject of engineering . . . *doing* engineering."

She nodded.

"I had to work on projects other people thought were important. But that really didn't bother me. I was interested in pretty nearly everything. But always, somewhere before the end of a project, someone would do some dumb administrative thing that made all my work just one big waste.

"And I found out that I could handle people. So I moved into management. I used my engineering talent to evaluate projects and I used my ability to handle people as well. Isn't it growing up — to develop and learn to use more and more of your abilities in more and more different ways?"

Elsa was silent.

He continued. "One thing led to another. And here I am. Partly it was a matter of what was necessary. Some people have scientific talent. Some people can communicate. Some people can handle people. Very few can do all three. Those who can — sometimes they really haven't much choice. Ultimately, they come under pressure to do tasks that require *all* their talents.

"Strong pressure," he said, looking up at Elsa and grinning diabolically.

Elsa did not reply. Finally she looked up. "Two years?" she asked.

"Just two years. I need you to set it up, to determine the priorities, to get it going. After that, it can be turned over to someone else, if you can't stand it. Or if you can't handle it." There was an edge of challenge in his voice.

*Just two years, Elsa thought. Even if I hated it, I could do it for just two years. Because it is important. More important than anything right now.*

*And I may like it. It would be different from anything I've ever done. I'd be a beginner again.* She laughed suddenly. *And back to base one, with my ass on the line.*

"All right," she said, and held out her hand.



# THE YENAGLOSHI EXPRESS

by Ernest Hogan

art: Bob Walters



*Whatever they're calling the vie de Bohème these days, Ernest Hogan appears to be living it. From West Covina CA he sends us letters decorated with zany cartoons. We published his first story in March 1982; the blurb thereto will tell you quite as much as you want to know about his Irish-Chicano ancestry and his wildly scrambled cultural influences.*



The road was sprinkled with little furry corpses and twisted through hills that made Horace wonder if he hadn't driven all the way to Mars last night; then beside it was a sign made out of the hood of an old car: on it was spray-painted **REVENGE FOR SALE**.

He slammed the Porsche into a screeching halt, as though the sign and not a jealous rage had made him drive from the L.A. Basin to the Painted Desert wearing a tuxedo and not feel at all sleepy after thirty-two hours. He almost knocked it over, but the old Navajo sitting on a milk crate beside it didn't flinch.

The Indian looked ancient — with centuries of wrinkles on his face, and hair so white it was blinding in the desert sun. He wore a headband, a gaudy but faded print shirt, Levis that were equally faded, and a pair of dilapidated sandals. He didn't move. Not at all.

Horace thought that he must be some kind of scarecrow — a dummy or a mummy — set up as a joke along with that **REVENGE FOR SALE** sign. Who knows what Indians would do?

He stared for a while. The old man seemed real, and solid enough — he didn't quiver and shake from the heat like the desert behind him that seemed to be about to change into a tropical rain forest or an Arctic ice floe.

After undoing his tie, he took it and his vest off, dumped them into the same crumpled mound by the gas pedal with the jacket, undid a few more buttons of his shirt, and went over to check out this apparition. The old man didn't move. He didn't even seem to be breathing. Horace waved a hand in front of the eyes, which were convincing enough, though they can do wonders with glass eyes these days.

He thought of touching it, slapping the face, or maybe even a sock to the jaw, but those eyes — immobile, but there seemed to be . . . *something* . . . behind them. No. He turned around and figured — get back to the car, look for a restaurant, find out which direction was back to California, dream up some kind of cover-up yarn . . .

— then: “BOO!”

He jumped so high he almost cracked the deep blue sky and burned his hair off on the sun while coming as close to having a coronary as he ever wanted to come.

Somebody was laughing.

Right behind him was the old Navajo, alive enough alright — yukking it up like crazy, a big horse-laugh.

The old man had trouble switching from a laugh to talking: “. . . you should have seen the way you jumped! . . . Boy! . . . That was . . . so . . .”

Horace screamed.

The Indian held up his hand like a Late Late Show redskin ready to say “How!” Horace's scream stopped. Then the Indian stuck out his hand to shake and said, “Howdy, the name's Crazy Motorcycle! What can I do for

you, young fella?"

"Crazy . . . Motorcycle?" Horace said while shaking the hand that had more strength than it looked like it could have.

"Used to ride one back in the old days. Vroom! Vroom! I was really something — still am, too!"

"What do you mean sitting around, not moving, then sneaking up on me like that?!" Horace barked.

"Look, kiddo," Crazy Motorcycle said. "D'ya know how boring it is sitting here, waiting for a customer to come along? Sometimes it's days — months even, before somebody stops. Can you blame an old man for having a little fun? You try sitting in the hot sun for days on end without a soul to talk to and see what that does to your manners!"

Without turning around, Horace took three steps back toward his Porsche.

"Hey, young fella, don't go. Don't you want your revenge?"

"You sell revenge?" said Horace, suddenly unable to move.

"You betcha! Ya don't think I put that **REVENGE FOR SALE** sign up just so I could attract people to say 'Boo!' to, did ya?"

Horace made a weak sound, like a trapped animal, then said, "I wish I had a glass of water."

"Sure," the Indian said, handing over a tall, frosted glass, with ice and a twist of lemon. "Here y'go, on the house."

It was wonderful, just what he needed. He tried not to think about just where it came from, though.

"You should be feeling better in a few," Crazy Motorcycle said. "Now, pull yourself up a rock so's we can talk business. Just what kind of revenge can I arrange for you? Do you have anybody who's wronged you recently?" Horace thought of Randy and Jeanie — they must have been well under way with their honeymoon by now, in bed no doubt, grinding away. "How much revenge do you want? Something little? Embarrassment? Illness, maybe? Or an accident! Humiliation? Crippling? Bigger? Even death ain't out of the question." He imagined going to their joint funeral — then coming back to the cemetery later, driving onto the grounds with his Porsche, doing a burn-out on their graves.

"There's this couple I know," Horace said, "they just got married and . . . well, I introduced them . . . they wanted me to be Best Man . . . I don't see how she could prefer him . . . I'm the manager of a Pantzarama, he was just my assistant . . . I'm a better dresser . . . I have a Porsche, dammit! She must have been crazy! So I just put on the tux and drove like mad — and she said I was never spontaneous!"

"You must mean Randy and Jeanie," Crazy Motorcycle said. "Hm. He can take care of himself, and she took those martial arts lessons a few menacing rapists ago. . . . This'll call for something strong. You do want them killed, don't you?"

"Yeaaaaaah!" Horace hissed with a lot of extra a's. He couldn't believe he was saying it. It made him feel great, though.

"And of course, you're not going to want to be connected with it in any way — a murder rap could take the sweetness out of your revenge. I think this calls for a yenagloshi."

"A yena-whatsi?"

"A yenagloshi — a Navajo werewolf, made especially for revenge. We've been doing it for centuries."

Horace could see it: Randy and Jeanie back from their honeymoon, alone in their new apartment, locked in a carnal embrace. There's a knock at the door. They ignore it, and keep on doing what they're doing. The knock becomes louder — a savage pounding! The door fractures — a snarling, slaving yenagloshi rushes in, rapidly reducing them both to so much human hamburger. The police won't know what to make of it. It'll probably be blamed on a pack of coyotes, or someone's crazed doberman, or maybe even some unexplainable phenomenon that would be on "That's Incredible" a few months later.

"Yeaaaaaah," he said, feeling downright demonic and damn proud of it. "I want to send them a yenagloshi for their wedding present!"

"Very well," the old Indian got up and yelled "RU-DY! We gotta yenagloshi job here!" in no particular direction.

Rock 'n' roll filled the air.

"Excellent," said Crazy Motorcycle. "The Stones' 'Dancing With Mister D.' This is a good day for magic."

Then, there he was, Rudy, a young Indian strutting out of the heat ripples. He was in the last days of his teens, wore Adidas sneakers, Calvin Klein jeans, an Ozzy Osbourne T-shirt, ultra-hip wraparound reflector shades, had a short-but-strange postpunk haircut; and on his shoulder was the biggest ghetto blaster Horace had ever seen.

"Rudy, Horace. Horace, Rudy," the older Indian said.

"Gimme five, man," Rudy said, offering a palm to slap.

Horace slapped, but flubbed the elaborate handshake afterwards. He was never any good at those handshakes. He couldn't see how Rudy could manage it holding that hernia-maker of a radio.

"For a mere five hundred dollars, I'll make Rudy here into a yenagloshi — and you get your revenge!" Crazy Motorcycle said, patting the boy on the back.

Horace's eyes got big and his jaw went slack.

"Oh no!" he said, "I didn't bring any cash with me! All I have are these damn credit cards!"

"Could I see one?" the old Navajo asked.

"Of course," Horace said, handing over his Mastercard.

Crazy Motorcycle fixed an intense stare at the card — then froze solid.

"You seem to be a good credit risk," he said, snapping out of it, and

handing back the card. "It'll show up as slight overcharges on your bill for the next few months. Now, give me that thing, Rudy." He took the ghetto blaster, a real monster — a full-size component stereo system with AM/FM radio, cassette player, even a small TV screen.

"You see, Horace, in order to make a man into a yenagloshi, you must sacrifice something close to him," he said, holding up the portable entertainment system.

"My pride and joy, man," Rudy said. "It does eat up batteries to the max, though!"

As the old man set it down, the song "Hit Me With Your Best Shot" came on. "A good sign." He turned on the TV to *The Wolf Man* with Lon Chaney, Jr. "Excellent!" There was suddenly a sledgehammer in his hands. He chanted for a while, then proceeded to smash the hell out of the machine, which sparked and crackled madly as Rudy flinched and twitched as if he could feel every blow, then fell to the ground.

Gritting his teeth, grimacing in agony, the boy began to change. Hair sprouted everywhere. Bones creaked. Parts of him swelled while others contracted. His face stretched out, becoming more and more bestial. Teeth grew into fangs. Finally, he began to howl . . . a werewolf at last!

Horace was nearly sick as the yenagloshi got up on his hind legs, walked over, shaking off his torn shoes, shirt and broken sunglasses, and said, "How do you like it, man?"

"Uh . . . uh," Horace said.

"Overwhelmed ya, huh?" said Crazy Motorcycle. "A typical reaction. You white men just ain't used to magic. I'm sure glad you didn't throw up, though."

At those words, Horace was down on his hands and knees rowfing up what little he had left in his stomach.

The old Indian gave him a tall glass of water with about four Alka-Seltzers fizzing away in it. "Here," he said, "take this and you'll be all set. All you'll have to do is drive Rudy over to Randy and Jeanie's, he'll scramble their flesh, change back and then just give him bus fare . . ."

Alka-Seltzer sprayed all over the place. "What!" moaned Horace. "I have to transport him!"

"Of course, how else is he going to get there?"

"I thought maybe you could send him off, you know, by magic."

"Oh yeah, teleportation. I did it once. Complicated as all hell, and talk about expensive! No way could you afford it."

"But, I'm the manager of a Pantzarama!"

"Really?" asked Rudy. "Could you get me a discount?"

"My credit is good, try me," begged Horace.

"Believe me," the old man said. "It's just too damn expensive. If the Pentagon can't afford it, you certainly can't. Besides, where are we going to get an albino buffalo calf at such short notice?"

"Don't worry, man," Rudy said, putting a paw-like hand on Horace's shoulder. "I'm great company! I can even drive part of the way! It'll be a real blast, man! We can see what that hyper-thyroid Volkswagen of yours can do!"

Horace imagined a cop pulling them over. Their trying to explain why the picture on Rudy's license doesn't look a thing like him in his present form. Maybe the cop would be merciful and just drive by and empty his pistol into the driver's window, but then the Arizona police probably don't use silver bullets — besides, would they have the same effect on a yenagloshi as they would on an old-fashioned, run-of-the-mill, Eastern European-style werewolf?

"Just wait till I get my hands on your friends!" Rudy went on, pushing Horace toward the car. "You'll love it!"

"That's it," said Crazy Motorcycle, sitting down on his milk crate, "get going. There's a trucker who's pissed off at his boss that should be here in a few hours. I have to . . ." He froze, playing wooden Indian again, like somebody pulled his plug.

"You hungry?" Rudy asked once they were under way. "I'm starved, and this ol' beast could use a drink of gasoline. Whaddaya say we get something to eat?"

"Sure," Horace said. He hadn't eaten in a long time *and* had thrown up recently. His head was feeling all numb and fluffy inside. Food? Oh yeah, food, he thought, that would be nice.

"Great," said Rudy. "I'll show you the way to this little shopping center that has everything. We can get us a Megapizza with everything, and a tank of gas — you could also get me a pair of sunglasses, you know, a pair of those big, humungous ones to fit over this wolf-head. I never could take the desert sun without shades."

"I hope they take credit cards."

"They sure do, Horace, ol' boy! This is the 20th century, man! Even we Injuns got credit cards, video games, pocket calculators, pay TV . . . all the modern conveniences!"

A hairy foot then ground Horace's into the accelerator, sending the Porsche leaping ahead onto the twisting desert road.

"Quit driving like an ol' lady, man," Rudy said. "Let's mo-o-ove!" He then let out a long and loud combination hoot and howl. "Make way for the Yenagloshi Express!"

It gave Horace a bad feeling he hadn't had since he was a teenager in a car full of friends, all drinking and spilling beer all over each other while tearing up the moonlit suburban streets.

Luckily the gas station was self-service — but the clerk did ask him what kind of dog that was.

After finding a parking place far away from curious eyes, Horace got out.

To his horror, the other door opened.

"What are you doing?" he screamed.

"Just getting out, man," said Rudy. "You might need a little help . . . carrying stuff . . ."

"You can't go walking around like that!"

"Like what?" Then he hit hairy head with the heel of his hairy hand. "I forgot! I got used to it — I feel like I'm the regular me!"

"Stay in the car," Horace ordered. "And keep down. Stay out of sight!"

"I'm getting thirsty, too," the werewolf said while slumping down. "Why don't you get us a six-pack of beer while you're at it?"

Soon Horace came back with a large Megapizza, a pair of oversized sunglasses with pink frames, a six-pack of Coors and one of Coke. He couldn't take any alcohol — not in the middle of all this.

Rudy was laughing — an ominous, wolfish laugh.

"You shoulda seen it, man," he said between chuckles. ". . . these kids, little guys, about ten . . . they were puttering around the lot, looking in the cars, checking things out . . . you know . . . I was real quiet, let 'em get their faces right up to the glass . . . then I did this," he popped up with a loud hideous growl causing Horace to leap back five feet, dropping everything. "Yeah, they went like that, only worse . . . I thought they were going to wet their pants. . . ."

"Great," Horace said, picking everything up and getting into the car, "when they get home and tell their parents. . . ."

"What?" Rudy said, grabbing a beer, popping it open, showering the dashboard. "Kids never tell things like that to their parents — and if they did, you think the folks are gonna believe it?"

"Hope you're right," Horace said as he pulled out, "but in the meantime I think it's a good idea for you to stay scrunched down and try not to let anybody else see you."

"Ah, come on, Horace, ol' boy, ya gotta loosen up! Here, have a beer, relax . . ."

"I'd rather have one of these," Horace said, grabbing a Coke.

"If you like," Rudy said, scooping up a pawful of pizza and gulping it down. "Here, take a piece." He handed one over, running web-like strings of cheese.

Trying to grip his Coke between his knees while eating and driving didn't work out for Horace — he soon had a soaked lap. Moaning, he wondered how much the tux shop would charge him to have it cleaned.

"Looks like you're having a little trouble coordinating things there, boy," Rudy said, inhaling some more pizza. "Maybe you should let me drive a while." He slurped down another piece. "There, I'm satiated. Pull over, and let's change places!"

Against his better judgement, Horace did so. He was near exhaustion, and even though he didn't like the idea of having a werewolf behind the wheel,

he could use a break and some food.

While eating, he started concentrating on the radio. "Born to Be Wild" by Steppenwolf came on, reminding Horace of *Easy Rider*. Rudy sang along and brought the Porsche up to 90 m.p.h., then beyond. Horace thought about the end of *Easy Rider*, Peter Fonda getting his head blown off by rednecks. A lot of people in Arizona looked like those rednecks. . . .

"See?" the disc jockey said, in a smug, smartass tone. "I told you it was going to be one of those days! We just got a news bulletin that a pair of little boys have reported seeing a werewolf lounging in a Porsche in a shopping center in Tuba City — and the full moon isn't due for a few days yet!"

Horace crushed his still half-full Coke can.

"So here's a little suitable mood music . . ." Warren Zevon's "Werewolves of London" came on. Rudy howled along with every "Ra-oooh!"

"We've been discovered," Horace started babbling. "The goddam media knows about us — we're doomed!"

"Look, blue-eyes," Rudy said, looking over his sunglasses, "it was treated like joke news. Nobody takes that kind of story seriously."

He was right, Horace thought. If he'd heard that on the radio before today, he'd've had himself a good laugh and gone about his business — some kids thought they saw themselves a werewolf, ha-ha! Fun-ny! Only the werewolf was right here in his car, driving — and drinking! — at about 25 miles past the speed limit! And the kids no doubt notified their local police, who alerted the media — and this obviously was good enough reason to call out the National Guard! The Army! The Marines! The Air Force! It would be just like in those old cheap sci-fi flicks — the streets choked with troop trucks, tanks flooding the desert, a squadron of the latest state-of-the-art jet fighters zooming over to douse this particular stretch of highway with napalm! Or even the neutron bomb!

"Uh-oh!" Rudy's voice knocked Horace out of his paranoid fantasy.

A siren wailed.

Behind them was a state trooper's cruiser with its cherry flashing away.

A sound like a catatonic's groan came out of Horace.

"Don't worry," Rudy said, punching it towards maximum speed. "I'll lose 'em!"

Horace just sank down in his seat, his eyes glazed over and jaw slack. More catatonic noises escaped from his body. Then —

"Wha—?" Rudy said. "You say something?"

Horace took a deep breath. "Stop," he said. "Please, stop. I — I can't take any of this — any more."

"You sure? I know I can . . ."

Horace began to whimper.

"Okay," Rudy said, slowing down and pulling over. "But let me handle the cop."

The cop — a square-jawed giant who looked like he beat up Brahma bulls

to relax — walked over. Rudy opened his door and stepped out. Horace couldn't look.

There was a growl, and a tremendous thud, then Rudy's laughter. Horace imagined him standing there with the cop's larynx in his claw. Just what was the penalty for being an accessory to the murder of a police officer *and* transporting a werewolf across state lines with intent to commit more murder?

"He fainted!" howled Rudy. "Took one look at me and went down for the count!"

Spreading his fingers, Horace saw that it was true.

"Come on," Rudy said, "help me get him back into his car, so he don't get sunstroke."

He did. Totally numb. Like a zombie.

After throwing a couple of empty beer cans into the police car and emptying the contents of one he was working on all over the cop, Rudy said, "That should guarantee that he doesn't report this little incident. Now, let's see if we can be in California before nightfall."

Horace just sat down in the dirt and said, "No."

"Whata ya mean, 'No', man? You got some revenge to get. I gotta job to do. Don't you want to see me grind up Randy and Jeanie?"

Randy and Jeanie. He had forgotten all about them. Weren't they supposed to be getting married? Oh yeah, yesterday. He was going to be Best Man. That was why he had on what was left of a tuxedo. He must have missed the wedding. Big deal. It didn't seem to matter anymore, not one bit!

"Ah, I don't care," Horace said, absent-mindedly rubbing dirt into his hair. "I don't want it — you, anymore. I can't take any more of this! All I want to do is go home, get a couple of days sleep and forget that I ever heard of yenagloshi."

"You wanna cancel?"

"Yes!"

"Okay, if that's what you want," Rudy said, sounding disappointed. "We'll have to contact Crazy Motorcycle, though."

"How, smoke signals?"

"No, telephone."

Down the road was a public phone. It was a strange place for one, in the middle of nowhere. It was ringing.

"Go ahead," said Rudy. "Answer it. It's him."

"So you chickened out, eh, kid?" There was no mistaking that voice, even over the phone.

"Uh, yeah."

"It'll be another 500 bucks, you know."

"Oh well, just put it on my card. . . ."

"I already did. Now put Rudy on."

The yenagloshi was waiting right outside the booth. Horace handed him



the receiver, walked back to his car, and waited until a hip teenage Indian without a shirt and in torn pants came back.

"Am I going to have to drive you back?" Horace asked as Rudy adjusted those big, pink sunglasses and brushed off some stubborn tufts of fur.

"Naw, I can hitch it. I could use a shirt and some shoes, though."

Horace took off his — the ones from the tuxedo, which he was going to end up buying after all.

"No hard feelings about me backing out?" Horace asked.

"Naw, lots of them do. You know, I've done this eight times so far and haven't had to kill anybody yet! Guess not everybody can deal with this sort of thing. If I get back in time, maybe I can do that trucker job."

Horace wished him luck and drove off, to California and a kind of craziness he could live with.

## YET MORE SF CLERIHEWS

Ursula K. Le Guin

Wrote a treatise on Original Sin.

"I just *know* she means me!" cried Marion Z. Bradley,

Reacting rather badly.

Arthur C. Clarke

Wrote *2010* in the dark

While the monsoon made everything danker

In Sri Lanka.

James Tiptree

Is really a she.

The "Jr." tacked on in back

Threw most folks off the track.

The Nebula Committee

Will find me sitting pretty

When they get the news

That there's a new award for clerihews.

— Esther M. Friesner

# Screen Reviews

by Baird Searles

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## Cocoon's Age

Every summer the science-fiction and fantasy releases seem to be aimed at audiences shorter in the tooth. This last hot season saw a batch of flicks that specialized in rerunning old SF plots using pre-adolescents as the protagonists. What amazes me is that no one seems to mind; sophisticated SF readers who revel in Wolfe and Delaney happily trot off to see the latest stroller sci-fi epic, their lollipops clutched in their sticky fingers, and seriously discuss a work that if presented to them in book form would be instantaneously flushed down the john.

I've elected to discuss *Cocoon* simply because even if it's *not* adult, it's *about* adults, which is a step in the right direction. As I've noted previously, this column has two standards. Is it a good movie? And: Is it good science fiction (or fantasy)? As SF, *Cocoon* is purest garbage. But as a movie, it has some appealing aspects which deserve to be pointed out.

It concerns a colony of old folks in Florida, particularly three couples, a debonair bachelor, and a very swinging older single lady. The dilapidated estate next door to their sunset community has a usable indoor pool, which for some reason the men prefer to sneak into and use rather than the (presumably) more easily available beach.

Suddenly the estate is rented by a mysterious party: a middle-aged chap and three startlingly beautiful young

people. They also rent a deep-sea fishing boat with a young skipper, and spend every day diving for and retrieving peculiar stones from the ocean bed. These are very large, and are stored in the estate's pool. We know there is something not quite kosher about all this because the mysterious strangers are seen finding the stones among impressive ruins on the seabed; they are also helped by wild porpoises who gather for the porpoise — sorry, purpose.

In the meantime, back at the old folks' home, the men continue to sneak into the pool in which are stored the strange stones. And, by golly, Ponce de Leon was a few centuries too early. Not only do they get back all the vim and vigor of youth, but one of them is cured of cancer. They get the ladies to join them, and pretty soon they're break dancing and winning bowling trophies, not to mention carrying on in the bedroom like rabbits.

To make a longish story shortish, seems that the strangers are star travelers from Antares, returned to Earth after umpteen thousand years to rescue some fellow-Antareans who were caught in the submersion of Atlantis, and are still alive, more or less, in the stones which we are to consider as sort of cocoons. The rejuvenation effects are sheerly accidental. Our youthful oldsters vow to keep the secret; but since their carryings-on are hardly inconspicuous (an 80-year-old break-dancer is bound to attract *some* attention), the secret gets out, *all* the old

folks at Home jump in the pool and use up the life force, or vital energies, or whatever, and the cocoons don't get hatched.

But everyone is frightfully nice about it all; the Antareans dump the cocoons back into the ocean 'til next time (?), and instead load all the old folks onto the rented boat: and, upsy-daisy, into the Mother Ship they rise, to boldly go into the unknown. (If you're worried, they pay the boat's young captain handsomely before he jumps overboard after an affecting goodbye to the young lady alien, with whom he has had some hanky-panky).

It's aliens-as-beneficent-gods, wish-fulfillment SF of the worst (otherwise known as the third) kind. In their normal form, the aliens look like over-size Tinkerbells, or polychrome butterflies; their human skins are just sort of overall jump suits which they unzip and get out of to get comfy. (The female alien in her human skin is Raquel Welch's daughter, Tahnee, who looks almost as good as her mum; I bet they could market *those* suits.) The alien ship is the usual electrified Frisbee.

On the plus side, there are some breathtakingly beautiful shots of the porpoises leaping in the sea to welcome the alien ship. As for the humans involved, what a treat to see those old pro actors going at it! The ever-unflappable Don Ameche is the elder swinging male (in a wonderful moment, the score goes '40s Latin as he enters the overgrown estate, echoing all those Havana-Buenos Aires movies he made with Alice Faye), matched with Gwen Verdon, one of the great musical talents of the Broadway stage (Lola in both versions of *Damn Yankees*). One of the couples is the great husband-and-wife team of Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy (she

was the original Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*); another of the wives is one more great name from the old Broadway stage, Maureen Stapledon. There is also Jack Gilford, who doesn't have the opportunity here to demonstrate that he is one of the funniest men alive (as in *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way To the Forum*).

Though the script tends to overdo the "look at the funny old folks acting like young folks" kind of joke, the cast blithely overcomes *that* sort of foolishness. It's remarkable to see how the younger actors, Tahnee and Co., absolutely fade into the woodwork when confronted with the older generation, who movie-act rings around them.

Though it packs about as much wallop as a cup of cocoa, *Cocoon* will do if you want a harmless flick with its heart in the right place, and some *great* porpoises and old-guard acting.

### A Fine Howardy-Do

Robert Howard's works can not exactly be accused of being mature literary fare, but if I must have juvenilia, let it have the vigor and invention of that writer rather than the prepackaged pablum of the kiddy movies complained of above. And it looks like the producers of *Red Sonja* finally realized with what they were dealing in the stories of Robert E. Howard.

Howard, will-ye nil-ye, must be considered one of the two major creators of fantasy in this century. His achievement was that of a raucous, primitive fantasy, very close to the American frontier as he was close to the American frontier (in time and place) and totally unlike the gentler, more romantic British high fantasies that started with Morris. *And*, since the white American culture had no

mythology of its own, Howard went out and created his own, the brawling, sprawling, prehistoric Hyborian Age, full of strange civilizations and fantastical magic. And this was why his contribution to fantasy is such a major one — it was an amazing feat for a small-town Texas boy of the early part of this century.

Because of this, Howard still casts his spell today, and it was this factor that was totally ignored by those who brought Conan to the screen. Sets and costumes were drearily pedestrian; they looked like left-overs from the Italian historical epics of the 1950s, and it's a safe bet that most of the audience had no idea that this was supposed to be a created world with no links to our own history. ("Somewhere around the Roman period, just before King Arthur, whenever *that* was," guessed one of my less literate adolescent friends.)

The acting and dialogue in *Red Sonja* are execrable; the rest of the cast makes Arnold Schwarzenwhosis look good. (No, he's not playing Conan; he's Kalidor, High Lord of Harkania, if you must know.) The plot makes an acceptable stab at Howardiana. Sonja, whose background is vague, has rejected the advances of wicked Queen Gedren, who wants (gasp!) her body, and has therefore been raped (by the Queen's guard), roughed up, and left for dead. An unidentified flying magical being appears, looking like the Blue Fairy from *Pinocchio*, and says, in effect, "Buck up, old girl, you'll get yours. I empower you to be the best swordsperson ever. But don't tell lies."

Sometime later, after Sonja is indeed the best etc., Gedren adds insult to injury by killing her sister, in the process of stealing the Talisman, which has created the world and is about to destroy it through overloaded energies.

Gedren, of course, is going to use it to rule the world, and tough toenails if everything goes bang in the process. (Gedren takes the cake for the worst adult acting in the movie; she comes across like a peevish female executive who got out of bed on the wrong side that morning.) So off goes Sonja to get the Talisman before this can happen. She falls in with Kalidor, who is also out to save the world, and an insufferable ten-year-old Prince whose kingdom has been pillaged by Gedren's crowd. (You thought the kid in *IJ and the Temple of Doom* was unbearable; at least he could more or less act. In a long lifetime of observing bad child actors, this one is the worst.)

No need to say what happens: it's silliness, but amusing silliness. And what makes it more than palatable are the costumes, props, sets, and effects (this is one of those cases where sets and effects are pretty much the same thing); they're imaginative, handsome, and marvelously unlike anything else. Someone has actually gone and created the look of a created world. The Queen's throne room has the vivid softness of a Boris painting. The handsomely photographed landscapes have a filtered, magical color, with a single figure or a wonderfully unlikely building set in them. A band of outlaws wears motley armor all deriving from reptilian motifs. There's even some visual wit; I'll not soon forget the curious pavilion shaped like an enormous buffalo in which Sonja's sister dies. And there's a stunning visual sequence when Sonja finds the border of the Queen's Kingdom of Darkness, the landscape of which is indeed in deep shadow compared to the sunny plain on which Sonja stands. The two lands are separated by a ravine of molten lava, which is bridged by the huge skeleton of a dead something or

other. And I liked the moment when Gedren's sorcerer is trying to tune in Sonja's party on a sort of magical TV set (irresistibly reminiscent of the Wicked Witch watching Dorothy & friends approaching) and he gets instead a topless belly dancer.

Since I doubt that Howard was much into subtlety of acting or dialogue writing, I'd guess that Two-Gun Bob, as Lovecraft called him, would have loved *Red Sonja*.

## VIDEOWARES

*Dune* (MCA) seems to have so few champions that I thought I'd give the poor thing another plug on its release on video cassette, as well as report on how it fares on the smaller screen. Rather well, curiously enough; somehow one is more able to concentrate on its plot when one isn't being overwhelmed by large-screen grandiosity, and it comes across as more coherent than one would guess. (I know seeing it for a second time also helps, but I'm talking above and beyond that.) My video shop is also handing out little one-sheet "Dune glossaries" as an antidote to the universal bafflement that greeted it on its release; they'll probably be priceless memorabilia in due time. On the other hand, there is at least one scene that was breathtaking on the large screen that is totally lost on cassette: the gathering of the worms during the water-of-life scene.

*Soylent Green* (MGM/UA) is not

exactly what one would choose for a fun night with the VCR, but, come to think of it, not many things are these days. Nevertheless, it's a cut above most of the dreary-future films we've been subjected to since the first 1984. Based on Harry Harrison's *Make Room, Make Room* and released in 1973, it's a detective story set in 2022; the setting definitely steals the show from the story, but they're both well done.

In the world of 2022, population is up; and, due to the greenhouse effect, food production is down; New York's 40,000,000 people live on the edge of starvation. Services and any niceties of civilization are nil. An NYC detective is assigned to the murder of a VIP; murders are legion and mostly unsolvable, but this one seems something special. It, in fact, involves the new food, soylent green, on which most people now depend for subsistence.

What soylent green really is will not come as a great surprise (and is really rather logical, if you think about it). But getting to that revelation is more than half the fun; the production staff has thoroughly thought through what a metropolis in this kind of future would be like, and we are presented with a New York that bears all the more horrifying aspects of contemporary Calcutta and Beirut. It's done with exemplary intelligence, and there aren't many SF films you can say that about. ✂







# THE EYES OF ARGOS

by Harry Turtledove

art: Hank Jankus

*Somehow or other, we did not want to call this "Young Magistrianos Basil," but that's what it amounts to. History in his world has taken some strange turns and is taking some even stranger ones.*

*Harry Turtledove, who formerly used the pseudonym, "Eric G. Iverson," is a regular in these pages.*

The steppe country north of the Danube made Basil Argyros think of the sea. Broad, green, and rolling, it ran eastward seemingly forever, all the way to the land of Serinda, from which, almost eight hundred years before, the great Roman Emperor Justinian had stolen the secret of silk.

The steppe was like the sea in another way. It offered an ideal highway for invaders. Over the centuries, wave after wave of nomads had dashed against the frontiers of the Roman Empire: Huns and Avars, Bulgars and Magyars, Pechenegs and Cumans, and now the Jurchen. Sometimes the frontier defense would not hold, and the barbarians would wash over it, even threatening to storm into Constantinople, the imperial capital.

With a deliberate effort of will, Argyros drew back from the extended nautical metaphor into which he had fallen. What with the motion of his horse beneath him, it was threatening to make the scout commander seasick.

He turned to his companion, a blond youngster from Thessalonike named Demetrios after the city's patron saint. "Nothing so far. Let's ride on a little farther."

Demetrios made a face. "Only if you say so, sir. I don't think the devils are anywhere around. Couldn't we just head back to camp? I could use a skin of wine." Demetrios fit three of the military author Maurice's four criteria for a scout: he was handsome, healthy, and alert. He was not, however, markedly sober.

Argyros, for his part, did not quite pass the first part of Maurice's test. For one thing, his eyebrows grew in a single black bar across his forehead. For another, his eyes were strangely mournful, the eyes of a sorrowing saint in an icon or of a man who has seen too much too soon. Yet he was only in his middle twenties, hardly older than Demetrios.

He said, "We'll go on another half mile. Then if we still haven't found anything, we'll call it a day and turn around."

"Yes, sir," Demetrios said resignedly.

They rode on, the tall grass brushing at their ankles and sometimes rising to tickle their horses' bellies. Argyros felt naked in his long goat's-hair tunic. He wished he had not had to leave his mailshirt behind; the Jurchen were ferociously good archers. But the jingle of the links might have given him away, and in any case the weight of the iron would have slowed his mount.

He and Demetrios splashed across a small stream. There were hoofprints in the mud on the far bank: not the tracks of the iron-shod horses the Romans rode, but those made by the shoeless hooves of steppe ponies.



"Looks like about half a dozen stopped here," Demetrios said. His head swiveled as though he expected all the Jurchen in creation to burst out from behind a bush and ride straight for him.

"Probably their own scouting party," Argyros judged. "The main body of them can't be far behind."

"Let's go back," Demetrios said nervously. He took his bow out of its case, reached over his shoulder for an arrow to set to the string.

"Now I won't argue with you," Argyros said. "We've found what we came for." The two Roman scouts wheeled their mounts and trotted back the way they had come.

The army's hypostrategos — lieutenant-general — was a small, hawk-faced man named Andreas Hermoniakos. He grunted as he listened to Argyros' report. He looked sour, but then he always did; his stomach pained him. "Fair enough," he said when the scout commander was through. "A good trouncing should teach these chicken-thieves to keep to their own side of the river. Dismissed."

Argyros saluted and left the lieutenant-general's tent. A few minutes later, a series of trumpet calls rang out, summoning the army to alert. As smoothly as if it were a drill, men donned mailshirts and plumed helmets; saw to bows and lances, swords and daggers; and took their places for their general's address and for prayer before going into battle.

As was true of so many soldiers, and especially officers, in the Roman army, John Tekmanios was Armenian by blood, though he spoke the Latin-flavored Greek of the army without eastern accent. From long experience, he knew the proper tone to take when speaking to his troops:

"Well, lads," he said, "we've beaten these buggers before, on our side of the Danube. Now all that's left is finishing the job over here, to give the barbarians a lesson they'll remember a while. And we can do it, too, sure as there's hair on my chin." That drew a laugh and a cheer. His magnificent curly whiskers reached halfway down the front of his gilded coat of mail.

He went on, "The Emperor's counting on us to drive these damned nomads away from the frontier. Once we've done it, I know we'll get the reward we deserve for it; Nikephoros, God bless him, is no niggard. He came up from the ranks, you know; he remembers what the soldier's life is like."

Having made that point, Tekmanios used it to lead to another: "Once the battle's won, like I said, you'll get what's coming to you. Don't stop to strip the Jurchen corpses or plunder their camp. You might get yourselves and your mates killed, and miss out on spending your bonus money."

Again, he got the tension-relieving laugh he was looking for. He finished, "Don't forget — fight hard and obey your officers. Now join me in prayer that God will watch over us today."

A black-robed priest, his hair drawn back in a bun, joined the general on

the portable rostrum. He crossed himself, a gesture Tekmanios and the whole army followed. "*Kyrie eleison*," the priest cried, and the soldiers echoed him: "Lord, have mercy!"

They chanted the prayer over and over. It led naturally to the hymn of the Trisagion — the Thrice-holy — sung each morning on arising and each evening after dinner: "Holy God, holy mighty one, holy undying one, have mercy on us!"

After the Trisagion usually came the Latin cry of "*Nobiscum Deus!*" — God with us. Tekmanios' priest, though, had imagination. Instead of ending the prayer service so abruptly, he led the army in a hymn composed by that great author of religious poetry, St. Mouamet.

"There is no God but the Lord, and Christ is His son," Argyros sang with the rest. St. Mouamet was a favorite of his, and after Paul probably the most zealous convert the church had ever known. Born a pagan in an Arabian desert town, he came to Christianity while trading in Syria, and never went home again. He dedicated his life to Christ, producing hymn after impassioned hymn, and rose rapidly in the church hierarchy. He ended his days as archbishop of New Carthage in distant Ispania. Canonized not long after his death, he was, not surprisingly, venerated as the patron saint of changes.

Once the service was done, the army formed up, each of the three divisions behind the large, bright banner of its merarch. The moirarchs or regimental commanders had smaller flags, while the banners of the tagmata — companies — were mere streamers. The tagmata were of varying size, from two hundred to four hundred men, to keep the enemy from getting an accurate estimate of the army's size by simply counting banners. A small reserve force stayed behind to protect the camp and the baggage-train.

The horses kicked up clods of earth and a thick cloud of dust. Argyros was glad to be a scout, well away from the choking stuff. The men in the second battle line would hardly be able to breathe after an hour on the move.

The scouts rode ahead, looking for the dust-plume that would betray the Jurchen army, just as their own was being revealed to the enemy. Argyros chewed a handful of boiled barley meal, ate a strip of tough smoked beef. He swigged water from his canteen. From the way Demetrios grinned and smacked his lips when he drank in turn, Argyros suspected that his flask, contrary to orders, held wine. He scowled. Combat was too important a business to undertake drunk.

To give credit where due, the wine did not affect Demetrios' alertness. He was the first to spot the gray-brown smudge against the sky in the northeast. "There!" he shouted, pointing. When several of his comrades were sure they saw it too, a scout raced back to give the word to Tekmanios.

The rest of the party advanced for a closer look at the Jurchen. All the nomad tribes were past masters at spreading out their troops to seem more numerous than they really were. Given over to disorder, they did not fight by divisions and regiments as did civilized folk like the Romans or Persians,

but mustered by tribes and clans, only forming their battle-lines at the last minute. They also loved to set ambushes, which made careful scouting even more important.

The terrain sloped very gently upwards. Squinting ahead to lengthen his sight as much as he could, Argyros spied a group of plainsmen at the top of a low rise: undoubtedly the Roman scouts' opposite numbers. "Let's take them out," he said. "The high ground there will let us see their forces instead of them being able to watch us."

Nocking arrows, the scouts kicked their horses into a trot. The Jurchen saw them coming and rode out to defend their position, leaving behind a few men to keep observing the Roman army.

The nomads rode smaller horses than their foes. Most of them wore armor of boiled leather instead of the heavier chainmail the Romans favored. Curved swords swung at their sides, but they had more confidence in their horn-reinforced bows.

A Jurchen rose in his stirrups (which were short, plainsman-style) and shot at the Roman scouts. The arrow fell short, vanishing into the tall steppe grass. "Hold up!" Argyros called to his men. "Their bows outrange ours, so we can't possibly hit them from this far away."

"I'm stronger than any damned scrawny Jurchen!" Demetrios shouted back as he let fly. All he accomplished was to waste an arrow.

A horse screamed as a shaft pierced its flank. The beast ran wild, carrying the scout who rode it out of the fight. A moment later a Jurchen clutched at his throat and pitched from the saddle. The Romans raised a cheer at the lucky shot.

An arrow flashed past Argyros' ear with a malignant, wasplike buzz. He heard someone grunt in pain close by. From the inspired cursing that followed, he did not think the wound serious. Along with the rest of the scouts, he shot as fast as he could. Forty arrows made a heavy quiver, but they were spent so fast in combat.

The Jurchen also filled the air with hissing death. Men and horses fell on both sides. The Romans bored in, knowing their mounts and armor would give them the edge in a hand-to-hand fight. Argyros expected the plainsmen to break and run like a lump of quicksilver smashed with the fist. Instead they drew their sabers, standing fast to protect the little group that still stood on the rise.

One of those nomads — an older man, his hair almost white — was holding a long tube to his face; its other end pointed toward the main Roman force. Argyros would have crossed himself had he not held his sword in his right hand. It looked as though some Jurchen wizard had invented a spell for projecting the evil eye.

Then he had no attention to spare for the wizard, if that was what he was. A nomad in a sheepskin coat and fox-fur hat was slashing at his face. He turned the stroke awkwardly, cut down at the Jurchen. The plainsman

leaned away. He grinned at his narrow escape, teeth white in a swarthy face made darker still by grease and dirt.

They traded blows for a minute or so, neither able to hurt the other. Then out of the corner of his eye Argyros saw a tall lance bearing seven oxtails coming over the rise: the standard of the Jurchen army. "Break off!" he shouted to the rest of the scouts. "Break off, before they're all on top of us!"

Unlike the Franco-Saxons of northern Gallia and Germany, the Romans did not make war for the sake of glory. They felt no shame in pulling back in the face of superior force. Their opponents, who had been hard-pressed, were glad enough to let them go.

Argyros looked round to make sure all his surviving men had succeeded in disengaging. "Demetrios, you fool, come back!" he screamed. The scout from Thessalonike had succeeded in breaking through the picket line of Jurchen and, perhaps buoyed by the grape into thinking himself invincible, was charging single-handed at the little group of nomads that included the man with the tube.

His folly got what folly usually gets. He never came within fifty yards of the Jurchen; their arrows killed him and his mount in quick succession.

There was nothing whatever Argyros could do to avenge him, not with the whole nomad army coming up. He led the scouts off to another small rise, though not one with as good a view of the upcoming battlefield as the one the Jurchen held. He sent one of his men to report the situation to Tekmanios, and another to bring back more arrows. He hoped the fellow would return before the plainsmen took too great an interest in his little band.

Whenever he got the chance, he kept an eye on the Jurchen scouting party, which was now a good mile away. Riders went back and forth in a steady stream. Squint though he would, he could not quite make out the nomad with the tube. He frowned. He had never seen anything like that before, which automatically made it an object of suspicion.

The scouts cheered. Argyros' head whipped around. The Roman army was coming into sight. Seen from the side, as the scouts did, Tekmanios' plan was plain. He had a couple of tagmata on the right wing riding slightly ahead of the rest, concealing a strong force behind them that would dart out to outflank the Jurchen once the two armies were engaged. From the nomads' angle of view, the outflankers should have been invisible.

But they were not. Maneuvering without the neat evolutions of the Roman cavalry, but with great rapidity, the Jurchen shifted horsemen to the left side of their line. "They've spotted the screen!" Argyros exclaimed in dismay. "Gregory, off to Tekmanios, fast as your horse will take you!"

The scout galloped away, but battle was joined before he reached the general. The Roman outflankers never got a chance to deploy; they came under such heavy attack that both they and a detachment of troops from the second line had all they could do to keep the Jurchen from flanking them.

Nothing if not resourceful, Tekmanios tried to extend the left end of his line to overlap the nomads' right. The Jurchen khan, though, might have been reading his mind. The attempt was countered before it had fairly begun. It was not that the nomads outnumbered the Roman forces; they did not. But they seemed to be spotting every move as fast as Tekmanios made it.

The scout returned with the arrows. "I'm just as glad to be here," he said, tossing bundles of shafts from his saddlebags. "They're too fornicating smart for us today."

A horn call sounded over the din of battle: the order to retreat. Withdrawal was always risky; it turned with such ease to panic and rout. Against the nomads it was doubly dangerous. Unlike the Romans and Persians, the plainsmen, more mobile than their foes, liked to press pursuit to the limit in the hope of breaking the opposing army.

Even if he had been beaten, though, Tekmanios knew his business. In a retreat it mattered less for the Jurchen to be able to anticipate his movements; they were obvious anyway. His goal was simply to keep his forces in some kind of order as they fell back to their camp. And they, recognizing holding together as their best hope, obeyed his orders more closely than they would have in victory.

With the Jurchen between them and their countrymen, the Roman scouts swung wide of the running fight. Away from landmarks familiar to him, Argyros steered by the sun. He was surprised to notice how low in the west it had sunk. At last he spotted a line of willows growing along a riverbank. They were also visible from camp. "Upstream," he said, pointing.

The scouts were the first troops to reach the camp: not surprising, for they did not have to fight their way back. The men of the tagmata guarding the baggage-train crowded round them, firing anxious questions. They cried out in alarm when Argyros and his comrades gave them the bad news. Then, as they were trained to do, they hitched their oxen to the wagons and moved the wains into place behind the camp ditch to serve as a barricade against arrows.

That work, in which the scouts lent a hand, was not finished when the Roman army, still harassed by the Jurchen, drew near. Several oxen were shot and had to be killed with axes before their rampaging upset the wagons to which they were yoked.

Tagma by tagma, the Roman cavalry entered the campsite by way of the four gaps in the ditch. The companies that held off the nomads while their comrades reached safety scattered caltrops behind them to discourage pursuit to the gates. Then they too went inside, just as the sun finally set.

That night and the next three days were among the most unpleasant times Argyros ever spent. The moans of the wounded and the howls and shouts of the Jurchen made sleep impossible, and little showers of randomly aimed

arrows kept falling into the camp until dawn.

As soon as it was light, the nomads tried to rush the Roman position. Concentrated archery drove them back. They drew out of range and settled down to besiege the encampment.

Andreas Hermoniakos helped lift the Romans' spirits. He went from one tagma to the next, saying, "Good luck to them. We're camped by water and we have a week's worth of food in the wagons. What will the Jurchen be eating before long?"

The question was rhetorical, but someone shouted, "Lice." The filthiness of the nomads was proverbial.

The lieutenant-general chuckled grimly. "Their bugs won't feed even the Jurchen more than a couple of days. Eventually they'll have to go back to their flocks." So it proved, though the plainsmen persisted a day longer than Hermoniakos had guessed.

After scouting parties confirmed that the nomads really had withdrawn, Tekmanios convened an officers' council in his tent to discuss the Romans' next move. "It galls me to think of going back to the Danube with my tail between my legs, but the Jurchen — may Constantinople's patron St. Andreas cover their khan with carbuncles — might have been standing with their ears to my mouth as I gave my orders. One more battle like that and we won't have an army left to take back to the Danube."

"They shouldn't have been able to read our plan that well," Constantine Doukas grumbled. He had commanded the right meros, the one whose screening force and flankers the nomads had discovered. "They would have had to be right on top of us to see anything amiss. The devil must have been telling the khan what we were up to."

Hermoniakos looked down his long, straight nose at the grouching merarch. "Some people blame the devil to keep from owning up to their own shortcomings."

Doukas reddened with anger. Argyros normally would have sided with the lieutenant-general. Now, though, he stuck up his hand and waited to be recognized; he was very junior in this gathering. Eventually Tekmanios' attention wandered down to the far end of the table. "What is it, Basil?"

"The devil is more often spoken of than seen, but this once I think his excellency Lord Doukas may be right," Argyros said. That earned a hard look from Hermoniakos, who had been well-disposed toward him until now. Sighing, he plunged ahead with the story of the tube he had seen in the hands of the white-haired Jurchen. "I thought at the time it had to do with the evil eye," he finished.

"That's nonsense," one of the regimental commanders said. "After our prayers before the battle and the blessing of the priest, how could any foul heathen charm harm us? God would not permit it."

"God ordains what He wills, not what we will," Tekmanios reproved. "We are all of us sinners; perhaps our prayers and purifications were not

enough to atone for our wickedness." He crossed himself, his officers imitating the gesture.

"Still, this is a potent spell," Doukas said. The commanders around him nodded. Trained in Aristotelean reasoning, he reached a logical conclusion: "If we do not find out what it is and how it works, the barbarians will use it against the Roman Empire again."

"And once we do," Tekmanios said, "we can bring it to the priest for exorcism. Once he knows the nature of the magic, he will be better able to counteract it."

The general, all the officers, looked expectantly toward Argyros. He realized what they wanted of him, and he had had the sense to keep his mouth shut. If Tekmanios had it in mind for him to kill himself, why not just hand him a knife?

"Cowardly wretch!" Andreas Hermoniakos exploded when Argyros came to him the next morning. "If you disobey your general's orders, it will be the worse for you."

"No sir," the scout commander said, speaking steadily in spite of the heads that turned to listen. "It will be the worse for me to follow them. To do so would be no less than suicide, which is a mortal sin. Better to suffer my lord Tekmanios' anger a while in this world than the pangs of Hell for eternity in the next."

"You think so, eh? We'll see about that." Argyros had never realized what a nasty sneer the lieutenant-general had. "If you won't do your duty, by the saints, you don't deserve your rank. We'll find another leader for that troop of yours, and let you find out how you like serving him as his lowest-ranking private soldier."

Argyros saluted with wooden precision. Hermoniakos glared at him for close to a minute, his hands curling into fists. "Get out of my sight," he said at last. "It's only because I remember you were once a good soldier that I don't put stripes on your worthless back."

Argyros saluted again, walked away. Soldiers stepped aside as he went past. Some stared after him, others looked away. One spat in his footprint.

The line of horses was only a couple of minutes away from the lieutenant-general's tent, but somehow, in the mysterious way news has of traveling through armies, word of Argyros' fall got there before him. The horseboys gaped at him as they might have at the corpse of a man blasted by lightning. Ignoring that, he mounted his horse without a word and rode to the tent of Justin of Tarsos, until a few minutes ago his aide and now, presumably, his commander.

Justin turned red when he saw Argyros coming, and redder still to receive his salute. "What are your orders for me, sir?" Argyros asked tonelessly.

"Well, sir, uh, Basil, uh, soldier, why don't you take Tribonian's place in the eastern three-man patrol? His wound still pains him too much for him to

sit a horse."

"Yes, sir," Argyros said, his voice still dead. He wheeled his horse and rode out to the eastern gate of the camp, where the other two scouts would be waiting for him.

Having made up the patrol roster, he knew who they would be: Bardanes Philippikos and Alexander the Arab. Justin had been kind to him; both were steady, competent men, though Alexander did have a ferocious temper when he thought himself wronged.

It was plain Argyros' presence made them nervous. Bardanes' hand twitched in the beginning of a salute before he jerked it down to his side. And Alexander asked, "Where to, sir?"

"You don't call me 'sir'; I call you 'sir.' And you tell me where to go."

"I've wanted to do that for weeks," Bardanes said. But he spoke without malice, using the feeble joke to try to get rid of the tension he felt. To meet him halfway, Argyros managed the first smile since his demotion.

Still, it was the quietest patrol on which he had ever gone, at least at first. Bardanes and Alexander were too wary of him to direct many words his way, and his being there kept them from talking between themselves about what they most wanted to: his fall.

Bardanes, the more forward of the two, finally grasped the nettle. The camp had long vanished behind them; there was no evidence of the Jurchen. The three horsemen could not have been more alone. And so Argyros was not surprised when Bardanes asked, "Begging your pardon, but what was it you fell out with the lieutenant-general over?"

"I made a mistake at the officers' meeting," Argyros replied. He tried to leave it at that, but Bardanes and Alexander were waiting expectantly, so he went on, "I showed Hermoniakos to be in the wrong for taking Constantine Doukas to task. After that, I suppose all I would have had to do was blink at the wrong time and Hermoniakos would have come down on me."

"That is the way of things when you mix in the quarrel of men above your station," Alexander said with Arab fatalism. "Whether the bear beats the lion or the lion the bear, the rabbit always loses."

"Lions and bears," Bardanes snorted. "A damn shame, if you ask me."

"No one did," Argyros said.

"I know," Bardanes said cheerfully. "Another damn shame they didn't break some other officers I could name instead of you. There's more than one I owe plenty to, and I'd enjoy getting some of my own back. You, though — well, shit, you're a hard-nosed bastard, aye, but I can't deny you're fair."

"Thank you for that much, anyhow."

"Don't mention it. It's as much as we can hope for from an officer, and more than we usually get. You'll find out."

They gradually drew near another tree-lined creek, a good spot for a band of Jurchen to be lying in ambush. Bardanes and Alexander both uncon-



sciously looked in Argyros' direction; old habits died hard.

"Let's split up," he said, accepting that in their eyes he still held rank. It warmed him for what he was about to do, but only a little. He went on, "You two head down to the south end of the stand. Remember to stay out of arrow-range. I'll go north. We'll all ford the stream and meet on the other side."

The other two scouts nodded and took their horses downstream. Neither looked back at Argyros; their attention was on the trees and whatever might be lurking among them. As he had told them he would, he rode north. He splashed over to the eastern side of the stream. But he did not turn back to meet the other Romans. Instead he kept heading northeast at a fast trot.

He could imagine the consternation Alexander and Bardanes would feel when they came to the rendezvous point and found he was not there. The first thing they would do, no doubt, would be to race back to the western bank of the creek, to see if he had been waylaid there.

When they discovered he had not, they would follow his tracks. They would have to. He wondered what they would do when they saw the direction he was taking. He did not think they would follow him. He was riding straight toward the Jurchen.

Even if they did, it would not matter. By then he would have a lead of half an hour and several miles: plenty of time and distance to confuse his trail. In the end, his erstwhile companions would have only one choice — to go back to John Tekmanios and report he had deserted.

Which was only fair, because that was exactly what he intended to do.

The biggest worry, of course, was that the first Jurchen he met would shoot him on sight. But when he came riding up openly, one hand on the reins and the other high in the air, the nomad horseman was bemused enough to decide that taking him into camp would be more interesting than using him for target practice. He was not, however, bemused enough to keep from relieving Argyros of his bow, sword, and dagger. The Roman had expected that, and did not resist.

The tents of the plainsmen sprawled in disorderly fashion over three times the ground the Roman camp occupied, although Argyros thought the Jurchen fewer in number. The black tents themselves were familiar: large, round, and made of felt. The Romans had borrowed the design from the plainsmen centuries ago.

Men walked here and there, clumping about in their heavy boots. The nomads spent so much time on horseback that they were awkward on the ground, almost like so many birds. They stopped to eye Argyros as the scout brought him in. He was getting tired of people staring at him.

The khan's tent was bigger than the rest. The oxtail standard was stuck in the ground in front of it. Argyros' captor shouted in the musical Jurchen tongue, of which the Roman knew nothing except a couple of foul phrases.

The tentflap drew back and two men came out.

One was plainly the khan; he carried the same aura of authority Tekmanios bore. He was a small, stocky man in his mid-forties, narrow-eyed and broad-faced like most of the nomads, but with a nose with surprising arch to it. A scar seamed his right cheek. His beard was sparse; he let the few hairs on his upper lip grow long and straggle down over his mouth, which was thin and straight as a swordcut.

He listened to the Jurchen who had first encountered Argyros, then turned to the Roman. "I am Tossuc. You will tell me the truth." His Greek was harsh but understandable.

Argyros dipped his head. "I will tell you the truth, O mighty khan."

Tossuc made an impatient gesture over the front of his tunic. The garment was of maroon velvet, but of the same cut as the furs and leathers the rest of the Jurchen wore: open from top to bottom, fastened with three ties on the right and one on the left. The khan said, "I need to hear no Roman flattery. Speak to me as to any man, but if you lie I will kill you."

"Then he will not speak to you as to any other man," chuckled the Jurchen who had accompanied the khan out of his tent. His Greek was better than Tossuc's. He was white-haired and, rare among the nomads, plump. His face somehow lacked the hardness that marked most of his people. The Roman thought he was the man who had had the tube that caused his present predicament, but had not come close enough during the fighting to be sure.

Seeing Argyros' gaze shift to him, the plainsman chuckled again and said, "Do not place your hope in me, Roman. Only you can save yourself here; I cannot do it for you. I am but the shaman of the clan, not the khan."

"You also talk too much, Orda," Tossuc broke in, which seemed to amuse Orda mightily. The khan gave his attention back to Argyros. "Why should I not tie you between horses and rip you apart for a spy?"

Ice walked up Argyros' back. Tossuc was not joking; unlike the shaman, the Roman did not think he could joke. The ex-commander of scouts said, "I am no spy. Would a spy be fool enough to ride straight to your camp and offer himself up to you?"

"Who knows what a Roman spy would be fool enough to do? If you are no spy, why are you here? Quick, now; waste no time making up falsehoods."

"I have no falsehoods to make up," Argyros replied. "I am — I was — an officer of scouts; some of your men will have seen me, and can tell you it is so. I told the Roman lieutenant-general he was wrong in a council, and showed him it was true. As reward, he took away my rank. What was I to do?"

"Kill him," Tossuc said at once.

"No, because then the other Romans would kill me too. But how can I serve the Empire after that? If I join you, I can gain revenge for the slight many times, not just once."

The khan rubbed his chin, considering. Orda touched his sleeve, spoke in the nomad tongue. He nodded, short and sharp. The shaman said, "Will you swear by your Christian God that you speak the truth?"

"Yes," Argyros said. He crossed himself. "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, by the Virgin and all the saints, I swear I have left the Romans after my quarrel with Andreas Hermoniakos, the lieutenant-general."

Orda heard him out, then said to Tossuc, "His truth is not certain, khan, but it is likely. Most of these Christians are too afraid of the Hell of theirs to swear such an oath wantonly."

"Fools," Tossuc grunted. "Me, I fear nothing, in this world or the next." It was not meant as a boast; had it been, Argyros would have paid no attention to it. Spoken as a simple statement of fact, though, it commanded belief — and the Roman knew only too well he was not without fear himself, for the khan inspired it in him.

"Maybe it is as you say," Tossuc said at last. "If it is, you will not mind telling all you know of the Roman army." He bowed with a mocking irony more sophisticated than anything Argyros had thought to find in a nomad, waved for the Roman to precede him into his tent.

"Do not step on the threshold," Orda warned. "If you do, you will be put to death for the sin. Also, as long as you are among us, do not piss inside a tent, or touch a fire with a knife, or break a bone with another bone, or pour milk or any other food out on the ground. All these things offend the spirits, and only your blood will wash away the offense."

"I understand," Argyros said. He had heard of some of the Jurchen customs, just as the plainsmen knew something of Christianity. A couple, though, were new to him. He wondered nervously if Orda had left anything out.

The Roman had never been in the tent of a nomad chief; its richness surprised him. He recognized some of the displayed wealth as booty from the raid across the Danube: church vessels of gold and silver, hangings of cloth-of-gold and rich purple, bags of pepper and cinnamon and scarlet dye.

But some of the riches the Jurchen had produced for themselves. The thick wool carpets, embroidered with stylized animals or geometric shapes, would have sold for many nomismata in the markets at Constantinople. So would Tossuc's gold-inlaid helmet and his gem-encrusted sword, scabbard, and bowcase. And the cushions, stuffed with wool and straw, were covered in silk.

Except for a looted chair, there was no wooden furniture. The life of the Jurchen was too mobile for them to burden themselves with large, bulky possessions.

Tossuc and Orda sat cross-legged with a limberness that Argyros, years younger than either, could not match. The khan began firing questions at him: How big was the Roman army? How many horses did it have? How

many men were in the first meros? In the second? The third? What supplies did the baggage-wagons carry?

On and on the interrogation went. After each of Argyros' replies, Tossuc would glance toward Orda. The Roman could not read the shaman's flat, impassive face. He knew he was not lying; he hoped Orda did too.

Apparently he did, for at last Tossuc fell silent. The khan reached over his shoulder for a jar of wine, another bit of plunder from the Empire. He drank, belched, and passed the jar to Orda. The shaman took a pull, then belched even louder than Tossuc had. He offered Argyros the wine. The Roman drank in turn, saw both nomads intently watching him. The belch he managed was paltry next to theirs, but enough to satisfy them. They smiled and slapped his back. Tentatively, at least, he was accepted.

After riding with the Jurchen for a couple of weeks, Argyros found himself coming to admire the nomads he had fought. It was no wonder, he thought, that they raided the Roman frontier districts whenever they saw the chance. Living as they did on the yield of their herds alone, never stopping to plant a crop or settle down, they provided themselves with food and shelter, but no more. Luxuries had to come from their sedentary neighbors, whether through trade or by force.

The Roman came to see why the plainsmen judged wasting food a capital crime. The Jurchen ate anything they came across: horsemeat, wolves, wild-cats, rats all went into the stewpot. Along with other imperial troopers, he had called them louse-eaters, but he did not think of it as anything but a vile name until he saw it happen. It sickened him, but also made him understand the harsh life that made the nomads the soldiers they were.

For, man for man, they were the finest warriors Argyros had ever met. He had known that for years; now he saw why it was so. They took to the bow at the age of two or three, and began riding at the same time. And herding and hunting and struggling to get enough to eat merely to stay alive hardened them in a way no civilized man could match.

He was glad he was a good enough archer and horseman not to disgrace himself among them, though he knew he was not equal to their best. And his skill at wrestling and with the dagger won him genuine respect from the Jurchen, who had less occasion than the Romans to need the tricks of fighting at close quarters. After he had thrown a couple of plainsmen who challenged him to find out what he was made of, the rest treated him pretty much as one of themselves. Even so, he never lost the feeling of being a dog among wolves.

That alienation was only strengthened by the fact that he could only speak with the few nomads who knew Greek. The Jurchen speech was nothing like the tongues he had already learned: along with his native language, he could also speak a couple of Latin dialects and a smattering of Persian. He tried to pick it up, but the going was slow.

To make matters worse, Tossuc had little time for him. Planning each day's journey and keeping peace among his people — who quickly turned quarrelsome when they drank — kept the khan as busy as any Roman provincial governor. And so Argyros found himself seeking out the company of Orda the shaman more and more often. Not only did he speak better Greek than any of the other plainsmen, his mind also ranged further than theirs from the flocks and the chase.

Constantinople, the great capital from which Roman Emperors had ruled for almost a thousand years, was endlessly fascinating to the shaman. "Is it really true," he would ask, "that the city is almost a day's ride across, with walls that reach the clouds and buildings with golden ceilings? I've heard tribesmen who visited the city as envoys to the imperial court speak of these and many other wonders."

"No city could be that big," Argyros replied, sounding more certain than he was. He was from Serrhes, a town in the province of Strymon in the Balkans, and he had never seen Constantinople. He went on, "And why would anyone build walls so high the defenders could not see their foes down on the ground?"

"Ah, now that makes sense." Orda nodded in satisfaction. "You have on your shoulders a head. Now what of the golden ceilings?"

"It could be so," Argyros admitted. Who knew what riches could accumulate in a town unsacked for a millennium?

"Well, I will not tell Tossuc," Orda laughed. "It would only inflame his greed. Here, have some kumiss and tell me more of the city." All through the Empire, even here on the plains beyond its border, Constantinople was *the city*.

Argyros took the skin of fermented mares' milk from the shaman. Drinking it, he could understand why Tossuc so relished wine. But it did make a man's middle glow pleasantly. The nomads loved to drink, perhaps because they had so few other amusements. Even the Roman, whose habits were more moderate, found himself waking up with a headache as often as not.

One evening he drank enough to poke a finger at Orda and declare, "You are a good man in your way, but eternal hellfire will be your fate unless you accept God and the true faith."

To his surprise, the shaman laughed until he had to hold his belly. "Forgive me," he said when he could speak again. "You are not the first to come to us from the Romans; sooner or later, every one speaks as you just did. I believe in God."

"You worship idols!" Argyros exclaimed. He pointed toward the felt images of a man on either side of the doorway into Orda's tent, and to the felt udders hanging below them. "You offer these lifeless, useless things the first meat and milk from every meal you take."

"Of course I do," Orda said. "The men protect the men of the clan; the udders are the guardians of our cattle."

"Only the one God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, united in the Trinity — gives true protection."

"I believe in one god," the shaman said imperturbably.

"How can you say that?" Argyros cried. "I have seen you invoke spirits and take omens in all manner of ways."

"There are spirits in everything," Orda declared. When Argyros shook his head, the shaman chuckled. "Wait until morning, and I will show you."

"Why wait? Show me now, if you can."

"Patience, patience. The spirit I am thinking of is a spirit of fire, and sleeps through the night. The sun will wake it."

"We will see," Argyros said. He went back to his own tent and spent much of the night in prayer. If God had cast demons from men into the Gadarene swine, surely He would have no trouble banishing a heathen shaman's fire-spirit.

After breakfasting on goats' milk, cheese, and sun-dried meat, the Roman tracked down Orda. "Ah, yes," Orda said. He pulled up some dried grass, set it in the middle of a patch of barren ground. The nomads were always careful of fire, which could spread over the plains with devastating speed. More than Orda's talk of the night before, that caution made Argyros thoughtful. The shaman thought he could do what he had claimed.

Nevertheless, Argyros kept up his bold front. "I see no spirits. Perhaps they are still sleeping," he said, echoing Elijah's gibe to the false priests of Baal.

Orda did not rise to the bait. "The spirit dwells in here," he said. From one of his many pockets he drew out a disk of clear crystal — no, it was not quite a disk, being much thinner at the edges than in the center. It was about half as wide as the callused palm of the shaman's hand.

The Roman expected an invocation, but all Orda did was to stoop and hold the piece of crystal a few digits in front of the dry grass, in a line between it and the sun. "If it is supposed to be a fire-spirit, aren't you going to touch the crystal to the tinder?" Argyros asked.

"I don't need to," the shaman answered. Blinking, the Roman came round for a better look; this was like no sorcery he had ever heard of. When his shadow fell on the crystal, Orda said sharply, "Stand aside! I told you last night, the spirit needs the sun to live."

Argyros moved over a pace. He saw a brilliant point of light at the base of a yellow, withered blade of grass. "Is that what you call your spirit? It seems a trifling thing to —"

He never finished his sentence. A thin thread of smoke was rising from the grass, which had begun to char where the point of light rested. A moment later, the clump burst into flames. The Roman sprang away in alarm. "By the Virgin and her Son!" he gasped. Triumph on his face, Orda methodically stamped out the little fire.

Argyros felt about to burst with questions. Before he could ask any of

them, a shouted order drew him away from the shaman. A nomad used many gestures and a few words of Greek to set him repairing bird nets made of rawhide strips. By the time the plainsman was finished telling him what to do, Orda had gone off to talk with someone else.

As he worked, the Roman tried to puzzle out why his prayers had failed. The only answer he could find was that he was too great a sinner for God to listen to him. That gave him very cold comfort indeed.

It was evening before he finally got another chance to talk with the shaman. Even after most of a day, he was shaken by what he had seen, and gulped down great swigs of kumiss before he nerved himself to ask Orda, "How did you find that that spirit lived in the crystal?"

"I was grinding it into a pendant for one of Tossuc's wives," Orda answered. Argyros had not met any Jurchen women; the khan's raiding party had left them behind with a few men and most of their herds, for the sake of moving faster. The shaman went on, "I saw the little spot of light the fire-spirit makes. Then I did not know its habits. I put the bright spot on my finger, and burned it. The spirit was merciful, though; it did not consume me altogether."

"And you still claim to believe in one god?" Argyros shook his head in disbelief.

"There are spirits in all things," Orda said, adding pointedly, "as you have seen. But the one god is above them. He gives good and evil to the world. That is enough; he does not need prayers or ceremonies. What do words matter? He sees into a man's heart."

The Roman's eyes widened. That was a subtler argument than he had expected from a nomad. He took another long pull at the skin of kumiss — the more one had, the better the stuff tasted — and decided to change the subject. "I know why you use that fig—figure of speech," he said accusingly, punctuating his words with a hiccup.

"And what is that?" The shaman was smiling again, in faint contempt. He had matched Argyros drink for drink, and was no more than pleasantly drunk, while the Roman was acting more and more fuddled.

"Because you are like Argos Panoptes in the legend." After a moment, Argyros realized he was going to have to explain who Argos Panoptes was; Orda, after all, had not enjoyed the benefits of a classical education.

"Argos had eyes all over his body, so he could see every which way at the same time. You must have learned some of the magic that made him as he was." He told how he had led the Roman forces who had tried to attack Orda and the Jurchen scouting party on their little rise during the battle. "Wherever you pointed that tube, you seemed to know just what the Romans were going to do. It must have been a spell for reading the officers' minds."

The shaman grinned, in high good humor now. "Your first guess was better. I do have these eyes of Argos you were talking about." His sibilant

accent made the name end with a menacing hiss.

Argyros started to cross himself, checked the gesture before it was well begun. Even without Orda's remarks, the church vessels Tossuc had stolen showed how little use the Jurchen had for Christianity. And no wonder — the Empire used religious submission as a tool for gaining political control. Now that he was living with the nomads, the Roman did not want to antagonize them. But he felt a chill of fear all the same. He had always thought of Argos as a character from pagan legend, and from ancient pagan legend at that. To conceive of him as real, and as still existing thirteen centuries after the Incarnation, rocked the foundations of Argyros' world.

Shivering, the Roman said, "Let me have the kumiss again, Orda." But when the Jurchen shaman passed him the skin, he almost dropped it.

"Aiee! Careful! Don't spill it," the shaman exclaimed as Argyros fumbled. "Here, give it back to me. I won't waste it, I promise."

"Sorry." The Roman still seemed to be having trouble getting control of the leather sack. Finally, shaking his head in embarrassment, he handed it to Orda. The shaman tilted it up and emptied it, noisily smacking his lips.

"Tastes odd," he remarked, a slight frown appearing on his face.

"I didn't notice anything," Argyros said.

"What do you know about kumiss?" Orda snorted.

They talked on for a little while. The shaman started to yawn, checked himself, then did throw his mouth open till his jaw creaked. Even in the flickering lamplight, his pupils shrank almost to pinholes. He yawned again. As his eyelids fluttered, he glared at Argyros in drowsy suspicion. "Did you —?" His chin fell forward onto his chest. He let out a soft snore as he slumped to the carpet.

The Roman sat motionless for several minutes, until he was certain Orda would not rouse. He rather liked the shaman, and hoped he had not given him enough poppy juice to stop his breathing. No — Orda's chest continued to rise and fall, though slowly.

When Argyros saw the nomad was deeply drugged, he got to his feet. He moved with much more sureness than he had shown a few minutes before. He knew he had to hurry. As shaman, Orda gave the Jurchen — and their horses — such doctoring as they had. A plainsman might come to his tent at any hour of the night.

Several wicker chests against the far wall of the tent held the shaman's possessions. Argyros began pawing through them. He appropriated a dagger, which he tucked under his tunic, and a bowcase and a couple of extra bowstrings. As soon as he was done with a chest, he stuffed Orda's belongings back into it; that way a visitor might, with the Virgin's aid, merely reckon the shaman too drunk asleep to be awakened.

Half of Orda's gear was for sorcery of one kind or another. Argyros wanted to take much of it with him to examine when he had the chance, but he was too pressed for time and too leery of magic he did not understand.



There! That was the tube he had seen Orda wielding against the Romans. He had thought it made of metal, but it turned out to be black-painted leather over a framework of sticks. Sure enough, there were two Argos-eyes, one at either end, glassily reflecting the light of the lamps back at him. Shuddering, he stuck the tube next to the knife, draped his tunic to hide the bulge as best he could, and sauntered out of the shaman's tent.

His heart was pounding as he approached the long line of tethered horses. "Who goes?" a sentry called, holding up a torch to see.

Argyros walked toward him, a grin on his face. He held up the bowcase. "Buka on the southern patrol forgot this. Kaidu rode in to sleep and told me to fetch it." He spoke in a mixture of Greek and the few words of the plains speech that he had.

After several repetitions and a good deal of pantomime, the sentry understood. Argyros was ready to go for his knife if the Jurchen disbelieved him. But the nomads had used him for such menial tasks before, and Buka was not renowned for brains. The watchman laughed nastily. "That stupid son of a goat would forget his head if it weren't stuck on tight. All right, get moving."

The Roman did not catch all of that, but he knew he had gained permission. He rode south, as he had said he would. As soon as he was away from the light of the campfires and out of earshot, though, he swung round in a wide circle, riding fast as he dared through the darkness. Away from the camp stench, the plain smelled sweet and green and growing. Somewhere in the distance, a nightjar gave its sorrowful call.

The waning crescent moon rose after a while, spilling pale light over the steppe. That made it easier for Argyros to travel, but also left him more vulnerable to pursuit. So much depended, he thought as he urged on his rough-coated little mount, on when the Jurchen discovered Orda in his drugged sleep. Every yard of lead he gained would make him harder to catch.

He used every trick he knew to make his trail hard to follow. He splashed along in the shallows of streams, doubled back on his own main track. Once he was lucky enough to come across a stretch of ground where the herds of the Jurchen had passed. He rode through it for a couple of miles: let the nomads enjoy picking out his horse's hoofprints from thousands of others.

Dawn was painting the eastern sky with pink and gold when Argyros began looking for a place of refuge. His horse still seemed fresh enough — the nomads bred tougher beasts than the Romans — but he did not want to break down the only mount he had. Moreover, he was so exhausted himself that he knew he could not stay in the saddle much longer.

He felt like shouting when he saw a line of trees off to his left. That meant a stream — fresh water; with a little luck, fish or crayfish; maybe even fruits and nuts. And, if worse came to worst, he would be able to fight from cover.

He let his horse drink, then tethered it close to the water, where, he hoped, no chance observer would spy it. After setting aside the dagger and

tube he had stolen, he lay down close by the animal, intending to get up in a few minutes to forage. His belly was growling like an angry bear.

The sun in his eyes woke him. He looked about in confusion; the light was coming from the wrong direction. Then he realized he had slept half the day away. He breathed a prayer of thanks that the nomads had not come upon him unawares.

There were freshwater mussels attached to several stones near the edge of the stream. He smashed them open with a flat rock and gobbled down the sweet orange flesh. That helped his hunger, a little. He tried to scoop a fish out of the water with his hands, but he did not have the knack. Some of the trees bore plums — hard, green plums. He sighed. He would have to hunt soon. Now, though, he was more interested in the tube.

He thought for a moment that he had broken it; surely it had been longer than this when he took it from Orda's tent. Then he saw it was not one tube, but two, the end of the smaller cleverly fitted into the larger. He extended it out to its full length again.

He looked at the eyes of Argos again. In daylight, with time to examine them, they did not so much resemble real eyes. They looked more like the crystal in which Orda had trapped the fire-spirit. Argyros had been about to break the tube open to see what was inside, but that thought stopped him. Who knew what sort of demon he might release?

Maybe he could see what the demon was like. Slowly, ready to throw the tube down in an instant, he held the larger end to his face, at the same time murmuring, "Mother of God, have mercy on me!"

The horned, leering face he had feared did not leer out at him. What he saw was even stranger; he had, after all, known demons since he was a child. But what was he to make of a tiny circle of light, far smaller than the diameter of the tube could have accounted for, appearing in the middle of a field of blackness?

And in the circle —! He snatched the tube away, rubbed at his eye in disbelief. Repeating his earlier prayer, he cautiously brought the tube up once more. Sure enough, there were the trees on the far bank, but minute, as if seen from an immense distance instead of a couple hundred feet. And they were — by the Virgin, they were! — upside down, their crowns where their roots should be and the stream above them, where the sky belonged.

He lowered the tube, sat tugging at his beard in perplexity. For the life of him, he could not see how looking at the world as if it were minuscule and head over heels would help the Jurchen beat the Romans. On the other hand, maybe he did not yet fully understand Orda's magic.

Well, what could he do that he had not done? At first he could not think of anything. Then it occurred to him that he had looked through the big end of the tube both times. What would happen if he tried the small one?

He held it to one eye, closed the other so as not to confuse himself any

more than he already had. This time the circle of light in the midst of the blackness was larger. But where before the image in that circle had been perfectly sharp — albeit tiny and topsy-turvy — now it was a confusing, fuzzy jumble of colors and indistinct shapes. Argyros thought of St. Paul seeing through a glass, darkly, although blurrily would have been a better word here.

He took the tube away from his face, rubbed his eyes. Orda had known how to make the accursed thing work; was he too stupid even to follow in a barbarian's footprints? Maybe so, but he was not ready to admit it.

He pointed the tube at the very top of a tall oak across the stream, paid careful attention to what he saw through it. Sure enough, the bottom of the vague image was sky-blue, the top green. No matter which end one looked through, then, the tube inverted its picture of the world.

How to make that picture clearer? Perhaps, Argyros thought, Orda had a spell for his own eyeballs. In that case he was beaten, so there was no point worrying about it. He asked the same question he had before: what could he try that was new?

He remembered that the tube was really two tubes. The Jurchen shaman had obviously done that on purpose; it would have been easier to build as one. With a growl of decision, Argyros pushed the apparatus as far closed as it would go.

He looked through it again. The image was even worse than it had been before, which Argyros had not thought possible. He refused to let himself grow disheartened. He had changed things, after all. Maybe he had been too forceful with his push. He drew the smaller tube out halfway.

"By the Virgin!" he breathed. The picture was still blurred, but it had cleared enough for him to see branches and leaves on the trees on the far side of the creek — and they looked close enough to reach out and touch. He pushed the tube in a bit, and the image grew less distinct. He drew it out again, to the point where he had had it before, and then a trifle beyond.

Even when the distant leaves were knife-edge sharp, the image was less than perfect. It was still slightly distorted, and everything was edged with blue on one side and red on the other. But Argyros could count individual feathers on a linnet so far away his unaided eye could barely make it out against the leafy background.

He set the tube down, awed. Aristophanes and Seneca had written of using a round glass jar full of water as a magnifying device, but only for things close by it. No ancient sage had ever envisioned so enlarging objects at a distance.

Remembering the classic authors, though, made him think of something else. That water-filled jar would have been thin at the edges and thick in the center, just as were Orda's crystals. And if that was so, then doing peculiar things to light was a property of such transparent objects, and could take place without having a fire-spirit trapped at all.

Argyros breathed a long sigh of relief. He had been horrified when his prayers did not stop Orda from making fire with the crystal. But if he had been praying for the overthrow of a natural law, even one he did not understand, his failure was perfectly understandable. God only worked miracles at the entreaty of a saint, which the Roman knew he was not. He had been in the field so long that even the Jurchen women, skin-clad, greasy-haired, and stinking of rancid butter, would have looked good to him.

He closed the tube and stowed it in a saddlebag. Now all that remained was to take it back to the Roman army. Roman artisans would surely be able to duplicate what the nomad shaman had stumbled across.

"Christ, the Virgin, and all the saints, but I'm an idiot!" Argyros burst out two days later.

His horse's ears twitched at the unexpected noise. He paid no attention, but went on, loudly as before, "If the eyes of Argos will help Tekmanios see his foes at a distance, they'll do the same for me. And with only the one of me and heaven knows how many plainsmen looking for my trail, I need to see more than Tekmanios ever will."

He took the tube out of the saddlebag, where it had rested undisturbed since he put it away there by the stream. After a bit, he stopped berating himself for stupidity. The eyes of Argos were something new; how was he to grasp all at once everything they were good for? Old familiar things were much more comfortable to be around. At the moment, this new device was more useful than any old one would have been.

He tied his horse to a bush at the base of a low rise, ascended it on foot. At the very top, he went down to his belly to crawl through the grass. Even without an Argos eye, a man silhouetted against the sky was visible a long way.

By now, he was no longer startled when the world turned upside down as he put the tube to his eye. He scanned in a full circle, pausing wherever he spied motion. Without the tube, he would have fled from a small cloud of dust he spotted to the south. With it, he was able to see it was only cattle, not horsemen, kicking up the dust. He could continue on his present course, riding round the nomads to reach the Roman army before Tekmanios took it back to the settled lands south of the Danube.

Tossuc and Orda would guess what he was aiming at, of course. But the steppe was so wide that he did not think the Jurchen could catch him by posting pickets in his path. They would have to stumble across his trail, and that, *theou thelontos* — God willing — would not happen. It certainly would not, if his prayers had anything to do with it.

Once another four days had gone by, he was confident God had granted his petition. He was farther south than any line the nomads would have set to waylay him. Better still, he had just come upon tracks he recognized as Roman — the horses that had made them were shod.

"Won't do to get careless now," he said aloud; he noticed he was talking to himself a good deal, to counteract the silent emptiness of the plains. He quoted Solon's famous warning to King Kroisos of Lydia: "Count no man happy before he is dead." And so, to be safe, he used the eyes of Argos again, looking back the way he had come.

The magnifying effect of the tube seemed to send the Jurchen horsemen leaping toward him. Even seen head over heels, the grim intensity with which they rode was terrifying. They had not yet spied him; they were leaning over their horses' necks to study the ground and stay on his trail. But if they had gained so much ground on him, they would catch sight of him soon — and the last phase of the hunt would begin.

He dug his heels into his horse's flanks, but the most he could extract from it was a tired, slow trot. Only a beast from the plains could have done as much as this one had; a Roman horse would long since have foundered. Even the nomad animals had their limit, though, and his had reached it.

He looked back again. This time he could see his pursuers without the tube. And they could see him. Their horses, fresh because they had not ridden the same beast days on end, came galloping forward. It would not be long before they were in arrow range. He might pick off one or two of them, but there were far more than that in their band.

All hope died when he saw another party of horsemen ahead. If the Jurchen were in front of him as well as behind, not even the miracle he did not deserve would let him escape. Those other riders had also spotted him, and were rushing his way as quickly as the plainsmen behind: racing to see who would kill him first, he thought as he set an arrow in his stolen bow and got ready to make what fight he could.

Because they were approaching instead of pursuing, the riders from ahead drew near first. He drew his bow to shoot at the closest one, but the winking of the sun off chainmail made it hard to reckon the range.

Chainmail . . . For a second, his mind did not grasp the meaning of that. Then he lowered the bow and shouted as loudly as he could, "To me, Romans, to me! A rescue!"

The oncoming horsemen drew up in surprise, then pointed past Argyros toward the Jurchen. He wheeled his weary horse to help them. The two parties exchanged arrows at long range. The nomads, as always, were better archers than the Romans, but they were also outnumbered. They could not press the attack home; a pair of charges were beaten back.

Argyros whooped exultantly as the Jurchen rode away, shooting Parthian shots over their shoulders in their withdrawal. Then his mount gave a strangled scream and toppled, an arrow through its throat. He had no chance to jump away. The beast fell on him, pinning him with its weight. His head thumped against the ground. The world turned red, then black.

His head ached abominably when he came back to his senses; the rest of

him was one great bruise. Most of all, though, he felt relief that he was no longer crushed beneath the dead flesh and bone of his horse. He tried his limbs, one after the other. They all answered to his will. Gritting his teeth, he sat up.

Half a dozen Roman scouts were standing round him in a tight circle. He craned his neck back to look up at them — that hurt too. Among the soldiers scowling down were Bardanes, Alexander, and Justin of Tarsos.

"So you find you do not love the barbarians after all," Alexander said when Argyros' eyes met his. He smiled. It was a singularly unpleasant smile, the expression a falcon might wear when about to stoop on a field mouse.

"I am afraid, Basil, you cannot undesert," Justin said. He sounded sorrowful; for a soldier, he was not a cruel man. But there was no yielding in him, either. He went on, "Going over to the enemy has only one penalty."

Bardanes, who was standing by Argyros' right side, did not say anything. He kicked the returned Roman in the ribs. One of the men behind him — he did not see who — kicked him in the back.

Alexander laughed. "You get what you deserve now, for running out on us." His foot lashed out too.

Argyros realized they were going to kick him to death, right there. He rolled into a ball, his arms drawn up to protect his face and head. "Take me to Hermoniakos!" he shouted — actually, the words came out more like a shriek.

"Why should we bother the lieutenant-general, when we can deal with you ourselves?" Alexander said. Argyros yelped as a boot slammed into his thigh.

"Wait," Justin said.

"What for?" Bardanes spoke for the first time, though his foot had been more than eloquent. Neither he nor Alexander could forget that Argyros had ridden away from their patrol, putting them at risk of being thought accessories to his desertion.

"Because I am your commander, and I order it!" Justin snapped. That was not enough; he could read the mutiny building on their faces. He added, "If Argyros wants to see the lieutenant-general so badly, we should let him. Hermoniakos has more ways to make death interesting than boots, and the temper to use them."

The scouts considered that. Finally Alexander chuckled. "Aye, that's so. The hypostrategos is a regular little hornet when he's angry. All right, we'll let him do this bastard in. I wonder what he'll come up with."

Argyros heard it all as though from very far away. None of it seemed to have any meaning; the only reality was his pain. The additional discomfort of being dragged to his feet and then lashed over a horse's back like a corpse hardly registered. Mercifully, he never remembered most of the journey back to the Roman camp.

He did recall waking in horror as he jounced along, and exclaiming, "My saddlebags!"

"Shut up," Alexander growled. "Nothing is yours any more. We've got 'em along to share out amongst ourselves, if you stole anything from the Jurchen worth the having." Argyros passed out again; Alexander took his sigh of relief for an anguished grunt.

The next time he roused was when they cut the bonds from his wrists and ankles and he slid to the ground like a sack of barley. Someone threw a pail of water in his face. He groaned and opened his eyes. The world spun more dizzily than it had when he looked through the tube.

"So you asked to come before me, eh?" He picked out Andreas Hermoniakos' voice before his vision would focus on the lieutenant-general.

"Answer his excellency," Justin of Tarsos said. Alexander stepped forward to kick him again, but Hermoniakos halted him with a gesture. Another bucket of water drenched Argyros.

He managed a sloppy salute, wondering whether his right wrist was broken. "I beg to report — success," he said thickly. He had a cut lip, but he did not think any of his teeth were missing — his arm had taken the kick intended for his mouth.

To the amazement of the scouts, the lieutenant-general stooped beside him. "Where is it? What is it?" he demanded. In his urgency, his hand clamped on Argyros' shoulder. Argyros winced. Hermoniakos jerked away. "Your pardon, I pray."

Argyros ignored that; he was still working his way through the two earlier questions. "The tube — in the saddlebag," he got out at last.

"Thank you, Basil."

As Hermoniakos rose, Alexander put into words what his comrades were feeling: "Sir, this is a deserter!"

"So you obviously thought," the lieutenant-general snapped. "Now fetch a physician at once. Yes, soldier, you!" Alexander fled in something close to terror. Hermoniakos turned on the other men. "The desertion was staged, of course — you had to think it real, so you would say as much if the Jurchen captured you. I never imagined you would be more dangerous to Argyros than the nomads."

When the lieutenant-general stooped by the saddlebag, a couple of scouts seized the opportunity to sidle away. The rest looked at each other, at the ground, or into the sky — anywhere but at the man who had been first their commander and then their victim.

Several of them exclaimed as Hermoniakos took out the tube: they had seen Orda with it too, in the scouts' skirmish before the battle began against the Jurchen. Justin of Tarsos solved the puzzle fastest. "You sent him out to steal the magic from the plainsmen!"

"Yes," Hermoniakos said coldly. He turned back to Argyros. "How do I make the spell work?"

"I don't think it is a spell, sir. Give it to me." He took the tube with his left hand, set it in the crook of his right elbow — yes, that wrist was broken, no doubt of it. Awkwardly, he drew out the smaller tube what he thought was the proper distance. Bardanes Philippikos made a sign against the evil eye as he raised it to his face.

He made a last small adjustment, offered the tube to Hermoniakos. "Hold it to your eye and point it at that sentry over there, sir."

The lieutenant-general did as Argyros suggested. "Mother of God!" he said softly. Argyros was not really listening to him. The approaching footsteps of the army physician were a much more welcome sound.

"Well done, well done," John Tekmanios said a few days later, when Argyros was up to making a formal report to the general.

"Thank you, your illustriousness," the scout commander said. He sank gratefully into the folding chair to which Tekmanios waved him; he was still a long way from being steady on his feet. He accepted wine, although he was not used to having a general pour for him.

"I wish there had been two of those tubes for you to take," Tekmanios said, "one to keep, and one to send back to Constantinople for the craftsmen to use as a model to make more." He paused a while in thought. Finally he said, "Constantinople it is. I'm pulling back to our side of the river before long. If I got by without your eyes of Argos all these years, I'll last another month."

Argyros nodded. He would have decided the same way.

The general was still in that musing, abstracted mood. "I wonder how that barbarian happened to stumble onto the device when no civilized man ever did."

Argyros shrugged. "He found that one crystal, ground properly, would start a fire. He must have wondered what two together would do, and looked through them when they were in line."

"I suppose so," Tekmanios said indifferently. "It's of no consequence now. We have the tube; it's up to us to find out all the different things we can do with it. I don't suppose the first men who got fire from Prometheus — if you believe the myth — knew everything it was good for, either."

"No, sir," Argyros agreed. That sort of speculation fascinated him. Christianity looked ahead to a more perfect time, which had to imply that times past had been less so. The concept was hard to grasp. Things had been the same for as long as he could remember, and in his father's and grandfather's time as well, from their tales.

Tekmanios had been thinking along a different line. "There also remains the problem of what to do with you."

"Sir?" Argyros said in surprise.

"Well, I can't keep you here in the army any longer, that's plain," the general said, raising an eyebrow at having to explain the obvious. "Or don't you



think it would be awkward to go back to command men who've beaten you half to death?"

"Put that way, yes, sir." The scouts would be terrified of him. They would also fear his revenge, and might even arrange an accident for him to beat him to the punch. "What then?"

"As I said, you did a fine job of ferreting out the Jurchen secret. It just so happens that George Lakhano-drakon is a cousin of my wife's."

"The Master of Offices, sir?" The Master of Offices was one of the most powerful officials in the Roman Empire, one of the few with the right to report directly to the Emperor himself.

"Yes. Among his other duties, he commands the corps of *magistriano*. How would you like to be the one to take your precious tube down to Constantinople, along with a letter urging your admission to their ranks?"

For a moment, all Argyros heard was "Constantinople." That was enough. Along with every other citizen of the Empire, he had heard stories of its wonders and riches for his entire life. Now to see them for himself!

Then the rest of what Tekmanios had said sank in. *Magistriano* were elite imperial agents, investigators, sometimes spies. They served under the personal supervision of the Master of Offices, the only man between them and the Emperor, the vicegerent of God on earth. Argyros had dreamed of such a post for himself, but only dreamed.

"Yes, sir! Thank you, sir!" he said.

"I thought that might please you," Tekmanios said with a smile. "It's your doing more than mine, you know; you've earned the chance. Now it's up to you to make the most of it."

"Yes, sir," Argyros said again, slightly deflated.

The general's smile grew wider. "Take a couple of more days to get your strength back. Then I'll send you and your tube back to the Danube, with a good strong resupply party along to keep you in one piece. You can get a riverboat there and sail down to Tomi on the Euxine Sea, then take a real ship on to the city. That will be faster and safer than going overland."

The grin looked out of place on Argyros' usually somber features, but he could not help wearing it as he bowed his way out of Tekmanios' tent. Once outside, he looked up into the heavens to give thanks to God for his good fortune.

The pale, mottled moon, near first quarter, caught his eye. He wondered what it might look like through the eyes of Argos. Tonight, if he remembered, he would have to find out. Who could say? It might be interesting.



# The Observatory

by George H. Scithers

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The ideas one should be most wary of are the ones that *sound* perfectly sensible and logical and convincing, because these are the ones that develop momenta of their own and keep on going, long after they have proved to be disasters in actual practice.

Making electric power companies get rid of the electric street railways that they owned *sounded* like such a good idea at the time — conflict of interests, hidden subsidies, and all that. But long after it became obvious that this simply led to the wholesale destruction of urban public transit — an automobile manufacturer found that buying transit companies and then running them badly was a great way to sell autos — the Federal Government kept right on insisting that the power companies divest.

And making AT&T sell the local telephone systems looked like a good idea too, but it's been the dumbest thing the Government has done this century: costs, paperwork, and inconvenience have gone up; the promised savings never happened; and the telephone equipment sold in this country — once entirely U.S.-made — is now being made in Asia by specialists in ticky-tacky. The Government response to widespread complaints has been to mumble about the impossibility of turning the clock back — have they never heard of Daylight Saving Time?

So, let's be wary — *very* wary — about all the wonderful-sounding things being said about the metric system. At last, we are told, we can calculate the weight of some cubic

volume of water without having to look up conversion factors and do messy arithmetic; at last, we will be using a truly *universal* system of units. But how often does one *need* to calculate, say, the distance from New York to Chicago in inches (or even centimeters), or to calculate the weight of water more precisely than given by the old rule, "A pint's a pound, the World around"? (For that matter, a liter of water doesn't always weigh exactly one kilogram.) And there's an annoying tendency for metric-system users to express dimensions in wildly inappropriate units, as by giving the length and width of something as big as a streetcar in millimetres.

Furthermore, the metric system isn't all that universal, and converting from centimeter-gram-second units to meter-kilogram-second ones is messy, even without the complication of two sets of electrical units as well. It can get downright dangerous, as when an international conference on weights and measures decreed that all forces and strengths of materials had to be expressed in dynes (for the cgs users) or newtons (for the MKS ones), which involves multiplying (or dividing) by the acceleration of gravity whenever one calculates how much weight can be carried by a cable or other structure. Perhaps astronomers have the right idea: they use meters and the like when it suits them, but they still measure interstellar distances in good, old-fashioned light-years and parsecs.

Besides, heresy can be fun!





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